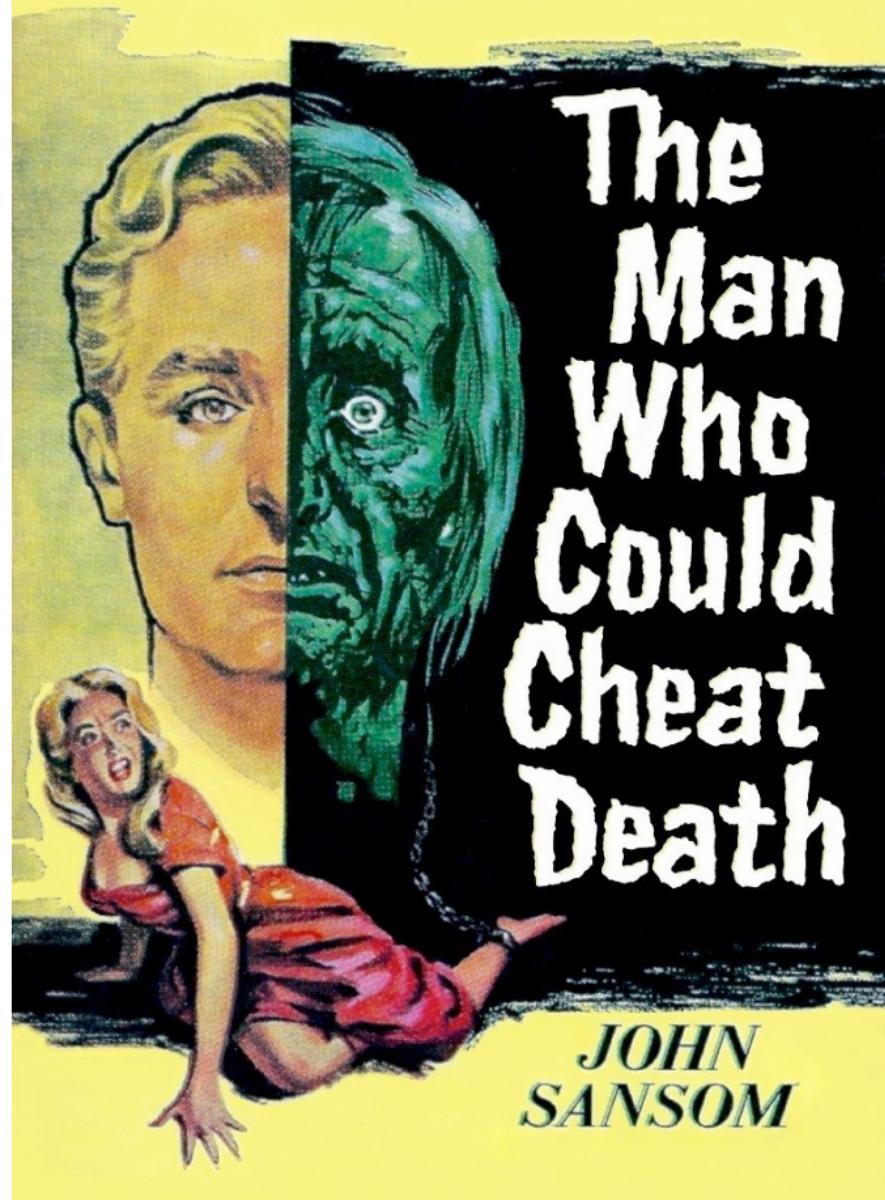


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HIS HIDEOUS OBSESSION LED HIM  
TO COMMIT GHASTLY CRIMES OF  
PASSION AND VIOLENCE

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# The Man Who Could Cheat Death

**JOHN  
SANSOM**

## **THE MAN WHO COULD CHEAT DEATH**

This is the spine chilling story of the horror film made by Hammer Films (the makers of *Dracula*). It is the story of a brilliantly-clever doctor with a hideous obsession that drives him to commit ghastly crimes of passion and violence. He discovers the secret of perpetual life, a secret that depends on the insertion of a gland from another human body. What happens when he cannot obtain the necessary gland in time ends in a shocking climax of horror and bestiality.

*The Man Who Could Cheat Death*—a Hammer Film Production. A Paramount release.  
Screenplay by Jimmy Sangster based on Barré Lyndon's play *The Man in Half Moon Street*.

# THE MAN WHO COULD CHEAT DEATH

JOHN SANSOM

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*Based on the Play*

The Man in Half Moon Street

*by Barré Lyndon*

*And the screenplay by Jimmy Sangster*

P.V.S EBOOK

Printed in England at The Philips Park Press, Manchester.

# The Man Who Could Cheat Death

## PROLOGUE

Madeleine liked to consider herself a working girl. She had her business hours, the same as other girls, the midinettes and shop assistants, and the fact that she didn't start work until they were on their way home didn't alter her illusion. She would get up at five p.m., cook herself a light meal on her gas ring, then spend a few minutes deciding what she should wear. The black with the vertical gold stripes, the grey with the maroon facings, the blue with the bird of paradise feathers. But the blue was getting old now, the seams had started to give.

"I must be putting on weight," she thought. There came a moment of panic while she checked the calendar. At least that was all right, she decided, it must be that she was eating too much.

She selected the black dress with the gold stripes. It nipped her waist in nicely and accentuated her breasts, forcing them up and allowing them to swell from the bodice. Men liked their girls big breasted. By the time they realized that this wasn't the case with Madeleine, they were usually in too much of a hurry to bother anyway.

A dab of rouge, a touch of lip salve, and Madeleine was ready for work.

At this time of the year it was usually dark by the time Madeleine reached the park. She greeted Yvonne whose beat was outside the gates. "Good evening Yvonne," she said politely. "Good evening," said Yvonne coldly. "Stuck up bitch," thought Madeleine as she passed through the gates. "Just because she has the postmaster as a regular she thinks she's Madame de Pompadour."

Secretly Madeleine envied Yvonne her postmaster. Madeleine only had one regular and heaven knows what he did for a living. Tonight was his night, she suddenly remembered, as she moved down the broad stone steps to the lamp-post that illuminated the section of the park she considered hers. Perhaps she should have worn her grey with maroon facings, it was his favourite. But then she shrugged, what could it matter, she could have arrived wearing a potato sack and the end result would have been the same. A discreet withdrawal into the bushes, five minutes frantic effort from the man and ten francs in her purse. Madeleine had read once of a high class courtesan who owned a beautiful apartment on the Champs-Élysées. She would entertain her guests to a champagne dinner in the apartment, and then retire to a

silk draped boudoir to ply her trade. One customer all night was her rule and she received a thousand francs for it. When Madeleine thought of the amount of work she had to do to earn a thousand francs it made her feel like crying. One day she'd be like that courtesan, she thought. One day the right man would come along and put her on the road to success. In the meantime she had her regular.

She took up her station under the lamp-post drawing her boa closer round her bare shoulders. There was a mist beginning to creep up from the river across the park. The streaked rays from the lamp picked out the high points of her common little face, her too full mouth, her urchin tilted nose. Footsteps approaching made her slip the boa from her shoulders and adopt her professional pose. She looked towards the approaching sound.

Through the mist appeared the figure of a man. He was wearing an overcoat with the collar pulled up high around his ears, shielding his face. He was carrying a small black leather bag which reflected the light. He was in a hurry, heading towards the gates. Madeleine stepped away from the lamp-post into his path. He stopped, surprised, and she had a momentary impression of a finely drawn face, and of two bright, almost luminous eyes. Before she could say anything he brushed past her, leaving her standing. She turned and looked after him. Already he was almost out of sight in the enveloping mist, his footsteps ringing hollowly back to her. Pity, she thought without rancour, he was young, good looking and obviously quite well off. A professional man, she thought by the little black bag he carried. A doctor probably. She allowed her mind to carry her off into a world where she was the mistress of the most eminent surgeon in all Europe. Famous men were clamouring for her favours but she would turn them all down because she was faithful to her lover. Well nearly all, she thought.

Half an hour later she was approached by a customer. Her regular still hadn't appeared, but it was past his time, and after a moment's hesitation she tucked her arm under that of her customer and moved off chatting gaily.

Between eight and ten that evening she earned fifty francs and forgot all about her regular. She was returning to the park for the sixth time when she noticed a commotion from between the trees which bordered the lane about fifty yards from her beat. She walked over to see what it was about.

Gathered at the edge of the lake was a group of about ten people. Three of them were uniformed policemen, and at least three of the others were policemen too, only in plain clothes. Madeleine had had enough dealings with the police to be able to recognize one when she

saw one, even if he were stark naked, she thought some times. Two of the policemen were holding up oil lamps illuminating a small area about twelve feet square. In the centre of this area lay something covered with an overcoat. Whatever it was it had feet, two button-up shoes protruding from the bottom of the overcoat pointing skywards. Madeleine pushed past a young man and his girl friend and tried to get a closer look. There was an elderly man bent over the body, while a huge man with a black beard stood looking down at him. "Well?" said Black Beard.

"Hard to say Inspector," said the elderly man. "Have him taken to the mortuary, I'll look at him there."

The elderly man stood up, and Madeleine had a momentary glimpse of the face of the corpse as the overcoat was pulled back over it.

"Oh," she said quite loudly.

The young man and his girl friend turned to look at her. The young man grinned.

"Nasty, isn't it," he said cheerfully.

"I knew him," said Madeleine, and immediately wished she hadn't.

The young man looked interested, and his girl friend, recognizing the sort of person Madeleine was, took his arm.

"Come on Pierre," she said, "we'll be late."

The young man took no notice.

"If you knew him you'd better tell the police," he said to Madeleine.

"I think I made a mistake," said Madeleine.

"Better make sure," said the young man. "Inspector, this . . . this lady says she knows the corpse."

All eyes turned to Madeleine, and she wished even more she hadn't said anything.

"Come over here young woman," said Black Beard.

When Madeleine hesitated the young man gave her a push.

"Go on," he said.

Madeleine moved forward two steps and stopped. She felt very conscious of everyone watching her.

"Closer," said Black Beard.

Madeleine moved closer.

"I'm Inspector Legris of the Sûreté," said Black Beard. "You say you know this man?" He prodded the overcoat with his foot.

"No, sir," said Madeleine.

"How can you tell, you can't see him?" said Legris. He reached down and pulled the overcoat from the face of the body. It was him all right, thought Madeleine. Her regular, her only regular. Having a

regular was a sign of prestige, now he's gone and got himself drowned. She felt angry all of a sudden.

"Well?" said Legris.

Madeleine nodded her head. "I know him," she said. Legris stood up and allowed the overcoat to fall back over the dead face. He looked at Madeleine for a moment then held out his hand. She rummaged in her bag and pulled out her prostitute identification and health card. Legris looked at it, turning it so that it caught the light from one of the oil lamps. Then handed it back to her.

"Socially or professionally?" he said.

Madeleine didn't understand him. She said so.

"Was he a friend or a client?" said Legris.

"Oh, a client," said Madeleine. "A regular," she added with a touch of pride.

Legris pulled from his pocket a waterproof bag, and from the bag he took a wallet. The wallet was wet. Legris opened it and looked inside.

"His name was Jean Le Fleur," he said. "Did you know that?" Madeleine shook her head.

"I thought his name was Michel . . . that's what he told me." She felt cheated somehow that he hadn't told her his real name.

"How often did you . . . did you see him?" asked Legris.

"Once a week. On Tuesdays."

"That's today."

Madeleine nodded.

"He didn't arrive today. It's the first time he's missed for four months," she said.

Legris started to put the wallet back in the waterproof bag.

"So he was on his way to meet you when this happened," he said.

Madeleine shrugged. She was beginning to lose interest, besides a fairly large crowd had gathered and her mind had started to return to business.

"Answer me," snapped Legris.

Madeleine looked up, surprised.

"Answer what?" she said.

"Was he on his way to see you?"

"How should I know?" said Madeleine.

"If, as you say, he always saw you on Tuesdays, and if he didn't arrive today, it's a logical assumption, isn't it?"

Madeleine didn't know what a logical assumption was, but she nodded her head anyway.

“That’s if he didn’t see you today,” said Legris.

Madeleine didn’t understand what he was getting at and said so.

“What I am saying,” said Legris slowly, “is that he could have seen you today as usual and this could have happened after.”

“It could,” said Madeleine. “But if it had, I’ve no reason not to tell you.”

“You might have one very good reason,” said Legris.

It took Madeleine thirty seconds to understand what he was suggesting. When it finally dawned on her she didn’t know what to say. Indignation, fear, distress, all rose inside of her. Indignation proved the stronger.

“How dare you suggest I had anything to do with it,” she said loudly. “I’m a respectable working girl. I do my job and mind my business. Just because he . . .” she pointed to the overcoat dramatically, “. . . was too drunk, or too old to walk straight, and drowned himself, you can’t go making nasty suggestions like what you are making.”

“He didn’t drown himself,” said Legris.

“All right, so he didn’t, but that’s no cause to . . .”

Madeleine stopped. “What do you mean he didn’t drown himself?” she said suspiciously.

“He didn’t drown at all,” said Legris. “He was rendered unconscious, then, after the murderer had finished he was pushed into the lake.”

“Murderer?” said Madeleine, eyes wide.

“Murderer,” said Legris.

“After the murderer had finished what?” said Madeleine, not very anxious to know.

“The deceased’s abdomen was slit open from here to here,” said Legris, indicating a line from just below his navel to the centre of his breast bone.

To this Madeleine said nothing.

## CHAPTER ONE

Georges Bonner's guests started to arrive at five p.m. Roget, his manservant, showed them straight up to the north light room, where Bonner met them at the door, pressed a glass of champagne on them, and left them to greet the next arrivals. The room was a large one occupying the entire top floor of Number 13, Rue Noir. The large sloping north light windows looked out across the roof tops of Paris, a view of strange enchantment in the gathering twilight. Occupying the centre of the room was an object draped in a dust sheet. The guests would move up to this object, walk around it a couple of times with ill-concealed curiosity, then move on either to see the view from the window or to poke about looking at some of the *objets d'art* that the room contained.

Margo Philippe, who was trapped in a corner by a vacuous young man who was something to do with the government, kept looking towards Georges, who had started to mingle with his guests, moving from one group to another, allowing no one to monopolize his attention for more than a few minutes.

“. . . so I said to the minister,” the young man was saying, “if you had adopted my plan at the outset we would never have got into this terrible mess. Do you know what he had the effrontery to say to me . . . ?”

Margo didn't know, neither did she care. She allowed her eyes to swing from Georges to the young man briefly.

“What did you say?” she said, and immediately looked back at Georges.

“No, Margo . . . it's what *he* said I'm telling you about . . . what the minister said.”

But Margo had managed to catch Georges' eye. She signalled frantically for him to come and rescue her. He excused himself to the couple he was talking to and moved across towards Margo.

“God, he's handsome,” she thought, watching him come towards her. “I've never known anyone quite like him before. Please let it go on.”

She smiled as he came up behind the young man, who turned, sensing Georges behind him. “Georges darling, Albert is just telling me the most fascinating story about what the Prime Minister said to him yesterday.”

Georges looked towards the young man. “Really,” he said.

“He wasn’t the Prime Minister, Dr. Bonner, he was the Minister of . . .”

“Georges, isn’t it time yet?” said Margo.

“I believe it is,” said Georges. He bowed slightly to the young man. “You’ll excuse us,” he said. The young man stood back while Margo took Georges’ arm and the two of them walked to the centre of the room. As though by a signal, the conversation died down and everyone looked towards Georges and Margo. They were a fine looking couple. Margo Philippe, twenty-five years old, a sensuous face beneath an elaborate, slightly overdone coiffure, shoulders and the upper half of her breasts bare and white, her waist nipped in tight and the folds of her dress sweeping out and down to the floor. She stood there with her hand resting on Georges’ arm, looking up at him.

Georges Bonner was about thirty-five years old. His features were finely cut and regularly proportioned. His eyes, light blue in colour, were demanding in their regard, his mouth was a line of determination coupled with slight aggression. He was a shade under six feet tall and he carried himself straight and well as though his body was important to him and he looked after it accordingly.

He waited while the conversation died around him, then he smiled —a smile of enormous charm. “My friends,” he said. “I am both delighted and honoured that you have all been able to spare the time to come here this afternoon. Although I am a doctor, and as such earn my living, it is as an artist that I would like to be remembered. All men must feel that they would like something of theirs to live after they have themselves died. As a doctor it is too often the other way round . . .” He allowed a couple of seconds for laughter, then he continued. “Sculpture to me is a release from the mundane daily round. I hasten to add to any of you who consult me professionally, that however mundane I may find the daily round, I give to it of my best.” Again there was a polite chuckle from the audience.

“But up here, in my studio, I work with beauty. And before I unveil my work, I must add that a great part of the credit for what you are about to see belongs to my lovely young model. An artist cannot create a thing of beauty unless he has a thing of beauty from which to draw his inspiration.” He looked down at Margo and smiled. She answered him by squeezing his arm. Georges looked up at his audience again. “There’s no more to be said,” he said. “All that remains is for me to throw myself on your mercy.” He disengaged his arm from Margo and turning, he removed the dust sheet from the object behind him.

It was a bust of Margo. Beautifully executed, it showed her head and shoulders, with the upper portion of her breasts. It was an

aggressive pose, head slightly forward, and mouth partly open. There was an indefinable sensual quality in the overall impression that the statue gave. It was the sort of likeness that made men want desperately to meet the model. It was a likeness it would have been difficult to achieve had the sculptor not felt attached to his model. Moulded into the features there was the desire and the satisfaction of the artist.

Georges and Margo stood back as the crowd moved forward with words of admiration. Then, obeying a pull at his sleeve, Georges allowed Margo to draw him towards the window seat beneath the north light window. She sat down and patted the place next to her. Georges looked over his shoulder to where his guests were gathered around the statue.

“They’ll be all right for a minute,” said Margo. “Sit down, I want to talk to you.”

Georges did as he was told. She rested her hand just above his knee.

“What happens now?” she asked.

“How do you mean?”

“Now that you’ve finished my statue I shan’t have any more sittings. We’ll need an excuse to meet.”

Georges smiled.

“Surely we’ve passed the stage where we need an excuse to meet,” he said.

“We have,” said Margo. “But other people don’t know that, or are you ready to tell them yet?”

“Not yet, Margo.”

“But Georges . . . why can’t we tell everyone we love each other. Is it such a terrible thing?”

“It’s a very wonderful thing,” said Georges. “One day we’ll tell everyone. In the meantime let’s think about ourselves, not of other people.”

Margo looked at him steadily for a moment, then she took her hand from his knee.

“All right, Georges, if you say so.”

Georges smiled at her and patted her arm. “Now I must go and act like a host.”

He stood up and was about to move towards the crowd around the statue, when he stopped. Across the heads of his guests he could see Roget showing two people into the studio, a man and a woman.

After a moment he skirted the crowd and walked up to greet the new arrivals.

“Janine, this is a surprise,” he said to the woman.

She smiled at him rather nervously.

“How are you, Georges,” she said.

She was a remarkably beautiful woman with dark red hair framing an oval face of perfect proportions. Her eyes were wide set and deep green in colour with flecks of brown sparkling in their centres. Her nose was straight, her mouth full and generous. She was tall, nearly as tall as Georges. High breasted, small waist and beautifully shaped arms and shoulders. She was wearing a gown which in defiance of current fashion clung to her body outlining every curve, every hollow. She held out her hand and Georges took it and raised it to his lips.

They looked at one another steadily for a moment across her hand, then she looked away, unsure of herself. She turned to the man she had come in with.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Pierre, this is Dr. Georges Bonner. Georges I’d like you to meet Dr. Pierre Gerrard.”

Georges and Pierre shook hands.

“How do you do,” said Georges, watching the tall, good looking man carefully.

“How do you do,” said Pierre. Then he turned to Janine.

“It’s getting late my dear,” he said.

“We’ve plenty of time, Pierre,” said Janine. “We only just arrived.” She turned to Georges. “Pierre and I were on our way to the theatre. I heard you were having a reception and I insisted he bring me here first.”

“I’m delighted that you did,” said Georges. “You can have a look at the statue I’ve just brought to light.”

He stood aside and indicated for them to precede him into the room. Pierre stepped towards the group around the statue, but Janine held back a moment. “Georges,” she said quietly, “is this my statue?”

Georges shook his head.

“No,” he said.

“Did you ever start it?” she asked.

Georges hesitated for a fraction.

“I think I must have left the sketches in Italy,” he said. Then he moved aside for her to precede him into the room and they moved down to join Pierre who was waiting for them.

“I’m glad you were able to come, Doctor,” said Georges.

“I’ve always wanted to see the inside of your place, Bonner,” said Pierre. “It has quite a reputation.”

Georges smiled.

“A good one, I trust.”

“Very good,” said Pierre. “Tell me, how many patients can you accommodate at one time?”

“Not more than fifteen,” said Georges. “I have the house next door to this one, which I use as a clinic. There is room for more, but I find the type of patient I get requires a great deal of individual attention.”

“Difficult cases?” asked Pierre.

“Difficult people,” said Georges, “Their money gives them an overblown sense of their own importance.” Pierre nodded.

“I’ve met them,” he said.

Georges smiled. “What doctor hasn’t.” He turned suddenly as there was a discreet cough from behind him. It was Roget.

Georges turned to Pierre and Janine. “Excuse me a moment,” he said. “What is it, Roget?”

“The train was met, sir. He wasn’t on it,” said Roget.

“There couldn’t have been a mistake?”

Roget shook his head. “No, sir,” he said.

Georges stood for a moment, a worried frown on his face.

“What time is the next train?” he said finally.

“There’s another in six hours,” said Roget.

“All right . . . see that it’s met.”

Roget nodded and turned away. As Georges turned he saw that two people were looking at him. From her seat at the window, Margo was regarding him steadily, while from the edge of the crowd Janine too was watching him. He hesitated for a brief moment, then moved across the room and sat down next to Margo.

Janine looked away with a hurt expression in her eyes.

“Who’s that?” said Margo, as Georges sat down.

“Doctor Gerrard?” asked Georges.

“The girl.”

“Her name’s Janine Dubois,” said Georges. “I met her when I was in Italy.”

“She’s very lovely,” said Margo. “Have you sculpted her?”

“I told you I only met her when I was in Italy,” said Georges. “When would I have had time to sculpt her?”

“She’s very lovely,” said Margo again.

“I hadn’t noticed,” said Georges.

“She can’t take her eyes off you,” said Margo.

Georges looked towards Janine who had moved to the far corner of the room and was standing alone. As soon as he looked up, Janine

looked away and pretended to be examining a print that was hanging on the wall.

“You’re imagining things,” said Georges turning back to Margo.

Margo smiled. “Perhaps I am dear,” she said without conviction.

They both looked up as a man broke away from the crowd around the statue and came towards them. He was a little man and he had a small goatee beard which bobbed up and down when he talked. He was excited, and he peered down at Georges short-sightedly through a pair of pince-nez.

“A very fine piece of work, Bonner,” he said. “Very fine indeed. As you know I am something of a collector. You wouldn’t be interested in selling it I suppose?”

Georges stood up.

“I’m glad you like it, Monsieur Bardelle. But as for selling it, I’m afraid not. You see sculpting is something I do for my own pleasure. I haven’t yet reached the perfection I seek and I can hardly allow work that does not satisfy me personally to go into other people’s houses.”

“It looks very good to me,” said Bardelle.

“You’re being kind,” said Georges. “But I’m sorry, I can’t sell it. I shall keep it with my other works.”

Bardelle looked around the studio quickly.

“Keep it where?” he said.

Georges smiled. “Not here,” he said. “I keep my statues somewhere only I know of. Somewhere where I can go occasionally and look at them. It serves a dual purpose. Firstly I can be reminded of my shortcomings as a sculptor and secondly I can see again something of the beauty of the lady I was fortunate enough to have as my model.”

He turned and smiled at Margo.

Bardelle looked from one to the other, then backed away nervously.

“Excuse me,” he said.

They both watched him go, smiling after him.

Janine, who was standing by herself, looked up as Pierre came across to her.

“Damn fine piece of work,” he said. “Don’t know how he finds time to do it what with having to run the clinic as well.”

“I think we ought to go, Pierre,” said Janine. “Would you get my wrap?”

“There’s no hurry,” said Pierre. “We’ve missed the first act anyway.”

“I want to leave, please,” said Janine firmly. Pierre looked at her for a moment, surprise in his eyes. “Of course, my dear,” he said finally. He moved away to fetch her wrap. As he left, Bardelle moved up to

Janine. He smiled at her vaguely.

“Remarkable sculptor, Bonner, isn’t he, my dear,” he said.

“He’s very clever,” said Janine.

“I wanted to buy it. He wouldn’t hear of it. Says he keeps all his stuff when its finished.”

Janine seemed disinterested.

“Really,” she said. Just behind her was a screen that stood across a corner of the room. Bardelle moved past her and peered behind the screen. “Wonder where he . . . hello, what’s this,” he said. His voice sounded excited, and in spite of herself Janine moved back a pace and looked behind the screen with Bardelle.

“I thought there’d be something else around here somewhere,” said Bardelle. “Full figure too, very beautiful woman she must . . .” He stopped in mid-sentence and glanced towards Janine, then he looked behind the screen again. This time when he looked at Janine he was blushing.

“I say,” he stammered. “I’m most terribly sorry . . . very clumsy of me.”

He backed away, then turned and tried to lose himself in the crowd.

Janine watched him go and then moved behind the screen to see what had caused this outburst. In the corner was a life-sized, full figure statue of herself. Almost completed, it showed every muscle, every hollow, every curve and detail of her body. High, full breasts, flat stomach, rounded thighs, the long sweep of her legs. The head was thrown back and the mouth was laughing. The laugh was mirrored in the eyes and in the whole essence of the statue. On a small table close to the statue were innumerable sketches, a hand, a foot, her face full, three quarters and profile. The sketches Georges said he had left in Italy. She looked at all this for a long moment, then she smiled. She was still smiling a moment later when Pierre’s voice pulled her round.

“Your wrap, Janine,” said Pierre.

Janine backed out from behind the screen, careful not to let Pierre see what she had discovered. She allowed him to put her wrap over her shoulders, then the two of them moved towards the door. Georges, who was still sitting with Margo got up quickly and reached them by the door.

“You’re leaving already?” he said.

“We have to be at the theatre,” said Pierre.

“Of course, I hope . . .” he was interrupted by a discreet cough from Roget who had appeared behind him.

“What is it, Roget?” he said.

“It’s seven-thirty,” said Roget.

Georges looked shocked. He reached for his watch.

“Are you sure?” he said.

“Yes, sir. I’ve checked with two clocks.”

Georges looked at his watch, then started to unclip it from its chain.

“We must be going now, Bonner,” said Pierre from behind. Georges turned to him and Janine.

“Good night to both of you,” he said almost rudely. Then realizing he had been rude, he smiled. “I’m so glad you were able to come.”

Janine and Pierre said their good nights and left. Georges turned to Roget and handed him the watch he had unclipped.

“Get me a new watch first thing in the morning,” he said. “You know I must have absolute accuracy.” As Roget moved off, Georges turned back into the room and clapped his hand once. Everyone turned to look at him.

“Dear people,” he said. “I’m afraid I must ask you to leave now. You all know that my main duty is the care of my patients, their needs must come before everything else. It is time for my rounds, and you’d be surprised how upset they can get if I’m late. I would like to thank you all for coming this evening, and I must apologize if I seem rude in bringing the party to an abrupt close.”

He moved to the side of the door as his guests started to leave. Margo stopped opposite him as she made for the door.

“I want to talk to you, Georges,” she said.

“Not tonight dear. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She looked at him steadily for a moment, then she smiled.

“All right, Georges . . . tomorrow then.”

She turned and moved out of the studio and her place was taken by Bardelle.

“If you change your mind about selling any of your stuff, Bonner, you know where you can contact me,” he said, his beard bobbing up and down furiously.

“Thank you for your interest, Monsieur Bardelle,” said Georges. “But I don’t think I will.”

“Just as you like,” said Bardelle. “Just as you like.” He followed Margo from the studio, and a minute later Georges was alone.

He stepped down into the centre of the studio and looked at the statue of Margo. The statue returned his gaze with sensual detachment. After a moment Georges turned and walked out of the studio.

As he came downstairs, Roget was just shutting the front door behind the last of the guests.

“What’s the time, Roget?” asked Georges.

Roget looked at his watch.

“Seven-forty,” said Roget.

Georges moved across to the door that led to his study.

“I won’t be needing you any more this evening,” he said. “I’m not to be disturbed again.” He started into his study, then he had an afterthought. He turned back to Roget. “If there’s any news when the man gets back from meeting the next train, you can come and wake me,” he said.

“Very good, sir,” said Roget.

Georges closed the study door behind him and walked across to the desk. The study was a warm, book-lined room. It was heavy with dark red drapes and leather furniture. A coal fire crackled cheerfully in the fireplace picking out the highlights on the backs of the books that reached from floor to ceiling. On the desk stood an oil lamp which Georges lit before sitting down in the leather-backed chair. There he reached in his pocket and pulled out a bunch of keys on the end of a thin gold chain. Selecting a key from the bunch he unlocked the centre drawer of the desk, and took from it a large leather-bound volume which he placed on the desk in front of him. He shut the drawer, removed the key from the lock and selected another key from the bunch. This key he used to unlock the crested gold clasp on the volume in front of him. There was a silk bookmark in the volume and he opened the volume to the marked page, turning back the bookmark so he could read the page in front of him. There was no printing in the book, only handwriting. Neat, precise handwriting that filled the left-hand page and half of the right. Georges pulled the lamp towards him and read the last entry in the book.

“24th. 13.30 3c.c. Reaction retarded.”

There was a stirrup clock on his desk. He looked at it. It showed seven forty-five. He got to his feet wearily and holding out his hands palm downwards he looked at them. They were fine hands, the hands of a surgeon and a sculptor. They were cut square and were well manicured. They were practical hands, hands that were used to working, there was strength in them, and character. Georges looked at them for a long time, concentrating his gaze on the finger nails. The half moons were well pronounced, almost luminous in colour. In fact they definitely were luminous, a small aureole of light surrounding each nail. Georges sat down at the desk again and reached for a pen. He made another entry in the book in front of him.

“19.45. Earlier indication of break-through apparent. Reducing time

between doses to six hours."

He put the pen down, closed the book, locked it and put it away in its drawer again. Then he got up and walked over to a small door set in the centre of the left-hand wall. It was a leather-padded door, toned in with the general décor of the room. He unlocked the door with a key from his chain and went through leaving the door open behind him.

This was his laboratory. It was a room fifteen feet square and lined on two sides with crude wooden benches. On the benches was a mass of chemical apparatus. Flasks, retorts, coils, tubes, burners. At first glance seeming in hopeless confusion, yet on closer look proving to be set out with a definite plan. In the centre of the room was a surgical table, while against the far wall was a large metal cupboard. Georges walked straight over to the cupboard and opened it. Inside there was a small, steel safe. Selecting a key from his key chain he unlocked the safe, swung the handle and pulled the door open. Immediately everything was bathed in an unearthly green light. The light shafted out from the safe filling the laboratory with its iridescent, unearthly gleam.

Georges was just about to reach into the safe when a small gasp of surprise pulled him around towards the door to the study. Standing in the door was Margo, looking in open-mouthed wonder towards the safe and the source of the green light. Georges turned back to the safe and slammed the door shut quickly, cutting the light off as though with a switch. Then he stood up slowly. He was very angry, although doing his best to control it. Finally he turned and faced Margo.

"I thought you had gone?" he said evenly.

Margo moved into the laboratory.

"I had to talk to you, Georges," she said.

"I told you tomorrow."

"Nobody knows I'm here," she said, moving towards him. "I waited in the music room until they'd all gone. Even Roget didn't see me."

"You've got to leave, now," said Georges.

"But I want to talk to you."

"Later, I have some urgent business that . . ."

"Not later, now," she said, cutting in on him.

She moved closer until she was standing where she could touch him. Her eyes were bright, her mouth wet, and her breasts moved up and down quickly as she breathed.

"What's going to happen to us, Georges," she said. "I must know."

Georges made one last effort at politeness.

"Margo, I'll talk to you tomorrow, I promise," he said.

“It’s Janine Dubois isn’t it?” she said. “You’re in love with her.”

Georges walked past her and stood by the door to the study.

“You must leave,” he said, a hard edge creeping into his voice.

“I’m not leaving so you might as well get used to the idea,” said Margo. She moved past him into the study and walked over to the corner of his desk. There she turned and faced him. “I watched you, Georges, upstairs. From the moment she came into the room you were different. You were conscious of her being there all the time. As for her, she didn’t take her sheep’s eyes off you once.”

Georges walked into the study and moved over until he was standing close to Margo.

“You have no idea what you’re talking about,” he said. He looked past her at the clock on his desk, it showed seven forty-nine.

“Now for the last time, will you please go?” But Margo had no intention of going.

“You don’t think for one moment I’m going to stand aside and let this happen without stopping it do you. You know that I love you, you let me tell you so time and time again. You’ve let me humiliate myself and I’m not going to step aside just because you’ve decided you’d rather have Janine Dubois.”

“I could call the servants and have you thrown out,” said Georges.

“You could,” said Margo. “But I’d scream so loudly that all Paris would hear about it.”

Georges looked at her steadily for a moment then moved past her to the far side of the desk. Suddenly he whirled round and slammed his hand hard down on the desk.

“For God’s sake get out,” he shouted. “GET OUT!” His voice rose almost to a scream. Margo stepped back involuntarily, then she leaned forward looking at Georges closely.

“Your eyes, Georges, what’s wrong with your eyes?” Georges looked up at her. His eyes had started to fleck with a peculiar green luminosity. Margo picked up the oil lamp and moved close to him.

Georges suddenly straightened up with a cry of rage. He swept his arm sideways knocking the lamp from Margo’s hand. Margo turned as the lamp hit the floor. The funnel fell off and broke, but no oil spilt, and the wick continued to burn, beginning to scorch the rug. Margo bent down quickly and set the lamp upright, then she looked up towards Georges. He had turned his back to her and was standing at the corner of the desk with one hand resting palm down on the surface of the desk, supporting him and taking his weight. His shoulders were sagging and Margo thought with a shock that suddenly he looked very ill and very tired.

She stood up slowly, her expression softening. "All right, Georges," she said gently. "We'll talk about it in the morning. Will you kiss me good night." Georges made no move. She started round the desk and put her hand on his arm. "I said I was going, Georges. Please kiss me good night."

Georges turned to face her suddenly.

"It's too late," he said. His body was infused with a strange inner light similar in colour to the one trapped in the safe. It had impregnated his bone structure so that the bones showed clearly through their covering of flesh. He was a living and moving skeleton, the skull gleaming with a green, unearthly light, his hands skeletal spiders. From the grinning skull stared two incredibly bright eyes, shot with the same hellish glow. One of the spiders that were his hands reached out towards Margo.

"Too late," said the skull. "Too late."

Margo's scream of terror was cut off as Georges whipped out his hand and clapped it across her mouth. With his other hand he grabbed her across the shoulders, ripping her dress and allowing her breasts to tumble free. For a moment they stood close together, the beautiful half-naked woman, and the ghastly green skeleton that held her. Then Margo's eyes started to dilate with pain and from beneath the skeletal hands a thin wreath of smoke curled upwards. There was a sizzling sound, a crackling of scorching flesh, and suddenly Margo's eyes rolled upwards in agony and she slumped limply in Georges' arms. Then he stepped back and allowed her to fall to the floor.

Without looking at her he stepped across her body and ran into the laboratory. He tore open the safe and reaching inside he pulled out a flask. Here was the source of the light. Contained in the flask was about a pint of liquid. In this liquid sparkled and gleamed all the lights of hell. A scintillating, iridescent mosaic of green that enveloped everything with its unearthly glow. Taking a beaker from the bench, Georges quickly measured out a dose of the liquid. Holding it up for a moment, he tilted his head back and swallowed the contents of the beaker. He stood motionless for a few seconds, then the beaker dropped from his hand and shattered on the floor. The sound seemed to pull him to his senses again. He replaced the flask in the safe and shut the door. Then he moved over to the door to the study, behind which was a full-length mirror. He stood in front of the mirror staring at the reflection. The grinning skull, the bright eyes, stared back at him, mocking him. Then slowly the skull started to fade. Very slowly at first, then faster, until in a minute Georges was looking at himself in the mirror. He held up his hands and looked at their backs, they were normal hands again, the giant spiders were no

more.

Georges stood in front of the mirror for a long time, his shoulders slumped, staring past his reflection into the distant imagery of his mind. Finally he straightened up and walked into the study. He picked up the oil lamp from the floor and carried it over to where Margo was lying, a shapeless bundle by the corner of the desk. He placed the lamp on the corner of the desk and went down on one knee and turned Margo over gently. Across her face, where his hand had choked off her cry, was a vivid, deep-seated burn scar, of puckered blistered flesh. A similar scar was burned deep into her shoulder and left breast where his other hand had held her powerless. Even now there was the stink of burning flesh in the air, and Georges wrinkled his nose in disgust. He looked at Margo for a long time, then he reached out and touched her burned face gently.

“I tried to tell you Margo . . . I did try.”

## CHAPTER TWO

The day after George's party, Janine Dubois got up earlier than usual. She drove her maid frantic by her inability to select a dress for the day. First she would settle on one, then after it had been laid out for her she changed her mind. Finally two hours after the maid had been called in to attend to her mistress, Janine seemed satisfied. She told her maid to have the carriage brought round to the front, and when the maid left her she gathered her parasol and hand-bag and examined herself for the last time in the mirror of her wardrobe. Satisfied that she'd made the right choice in her outfit she ran downstairs and stepped into the waiting carriage.

"Rue Noir," she told the driver.

It was a beautiful morning. The pavement cafés on the Champs-Élysées were crowded. The trees lining the great avenue were already beginning to deck themselves out for summer, the pale green leaf buds speckling the dark brown of the branches.

Janine was not sure exactly what she was going to say to Georges, but she trusted her instinct to carry her in the right direction. Her instinct told her that he must still feel something for her or he wouldn't have bothered with her statue. Her instinct also told her that for some reason he didn't want her to know about the statue. Perhaps it was to be a surprise she thought. Perhaps when it was finished he intended inviting her to see it, a private unveiling.

Her wandering mind carried her back a month, to the time when she and Georges had been lovers. They had met when they were both on holiday in Rapallo, that wonderful Italian town, with its pink and white houses and incredibly blue sky. She had been with her mother and father, and from the first she had been attracted to the tall handsome man who was staying in the same hotel. His name she had discovered from her chamber maid, who was delighted to supply the information when she scented a budding romance. Arranging a meeting had not been difficult, after all they were both French staying in a foreign country. After that the affair moved along smoothly. Georges had told her he was a doctor, practising in Paris, and that he also sculpted as a hobby. She had agreed readily to his request that she pose for him, while he made sketches which he said he would eventually use for a statue. She had had a moment's doubt when she realized he expected her to pose in the nude. But sensing her doubt, he explained gently that to an artist, the nude female form was an

inspiration, nothing more. No man had ever seen her unclothed before, and the first time she posed she had been nervous and shy. But he had viewed her with an eye of such complete detachment that her shyness had changed to pique, and she determined that he would see something more in her body than a few curves to be transferred to paper and later to be modelled. The next time she posed she waited until he told her she could relax, then instead of slipping into her robe as she had done before, she stepped down from the dais as she was, and moved over to the window, naked. The expression in Georges' eyes as he looked at her told her that she had achieved the desired effect.

Three days later they became lovers. Georges had been very gentle the first time, coaxing and stroking the responses from her, not hurrying her, but letting her take the lead. It had been an experience she would never forget. The tenderness intermingled with the violence, the gentleness with what almost bordered on the brutal. For two weeks it had continued, always they were together, enjoying each other's company, laughing together and making love together. Then one day Georges just wasn't there any more. The hotel manager said he had left the night before with no forwarding address and no messages. She had been unable to grasp it at first, then when she realized he had actually gone she waited for the letter that she felt sure must come. But no letter arrived, and two weeks later she returned to Paris with her parents. It took her a couple of weeks to locate Georges, and another week to pluck up sufficient courage to go and see him. Here she had used Pierre, and she felt a twinge of shame. Dear, faithful Pierre who asked her to marry him at least once a week, and here she had used him to accompany her to visit the man she loved. And the man who loved her. After last night she was convinced this was the case. The only shadow now, was why hadn't he admitted it, why had he run away and made no attempt to contact her afterwards. Today she was determined to find out the answers.

She dismissed the carriage at the entrance to the Rue Noir, and walked up to number thirteen. She didn't want her father's coachman carrying tales back to her own house. She read the brass plate outside the door as she waited for someone to answer the bell. CLINIQUE DE PARIS CENTRALE. Dr. Georges Bonner. The door was opened by the servant she recognized from the evening before. Roget, she thought his name was.

"Doctor Bonner please," she said in answer to his inquiry.

"The clinic is next door at number fifteen," said Roget politely.

"I'm not a patient," said Janine, and stepped into the hall before Roget could stop her.

“Who shall I say is calling,” he said rather coldly.

“Janine Dubois.”

Roget bowed and moved over to the stairs. At the top of the stairs he turned left. As soon as he was out of sight Janine walked up the stairs after him. She too turned left and found herself in the corridor that led to the north light room. At the top of a second flight of stairs, Roget was just tapping on the door. She heard Georges’ voice from inside the room.

“Just a minute.”

A moment later Roget opened the door as Georges called for him to come in. Janine moved along the corridor quickly and ran up the stairs to the open door. She arrived in the door in time to hear Georges say to Roget that he was to tell her that he was busy and couldn’t be disturbed. Then she stepped through the door.

“Good morning, Georges,” she said.

Georges was standing in the centre of the room. He was wearing a white coat over his ordinary clothes, and his hands were covered in clay. His gaze shifted from Roget to Janine at the same time as Roget turned to look at her. Roget turned back to Georges.

“I’m sorry sir. I didn’t . . .” he started to say.

Georges waved a hand.

“Never mind Roget,” he said.

Roget bowed and after an angry glance at Janine he moved past her and closed the door behind him. For a moment the only sound was his footsteps retreating down the stairs. Then Georges stepped forward and smiled.

“This is a pleasant surprise, my dear.”

Now that Janine was actually here, she didn’t know what to say. She had felt that things would fall into place without any help. She realized with a touch of nervousness that this was not going to be the case. She searched round desperately for a moment, grasping for something to say, then her eyes rested on what Georges had been working at. In the centre of the room was an object covered with a dust sheet. She looked towards the screen in the corner. It had been pulled out from the wall and the corner was empty. She looked back at Georges who was regarding her politely.

“You can uncover the statue Georges, I saw it last night.”

Georges’ look of polite inquiry vanished and for a moment he looked like a schoolboy who had been caught out in some prank. Then he smiled at her, but this time it was a different smile, a smile of understanding. Then moving to the statue he removed the dust sheet and stood back. Janine came down into the room and looked at the

statue for the second time. In the flat light that came through the large sloping window it was even more beautiful than she had thought.

“Georges, it’s lovely, really lovely,” she said finally.

“It’s you my dear,” said Georges softly.

She turned to him.

“Why did you tell me last night you hadn’t been working on it.”

“I was going to surprise you,” he said without much conviction.

“Why *did* you work on it?”

“I like to finish what I start,” he said turning away and busying himself at a bench.

“Is that why you ran away from me in Italy? Is that what you consider finishing what you start?”

He spoke without turning round.

“My holiday was over, I came back to work.”

“So suddenly?”

“There was a case,” he said. “It was urgent.”

Janine moved round so that he was forced to look at her.

“I waited for you to come back. I waited for you to write. Then I realized that if I wanted to see you again I was going to have to make the first move. Why are you afraid of loving me, Georges?”

Georges looked up at her, but said nothing.

“I watched you towards the end of the holiday. You were like a man heading towards something he wanted to avoid. I’d begun to think I’d won and that you were going to admit to yourself that you loved me. I was wrong.”

There was a long pause, then Georges spoke.

“All right, Janine. I was falling in love with you in Italy. This couldn’t be, so I left.”

“Why couldn’t it be?”

“It just couldn’t, that’s all.”

Janine moved closer to him.

“You knew how I felt about you?” she said.

Georges nodded. “I knew,” he said.

“Yet you still had to run away from it.”

Georges nodded.

“I’m not going to give up that easily,” said Janine. “I know you still feel something for me otherwise you wouldn’t have worked on this.” She indicated the statue with a nod. Suddenly Georges turned on her almost fiercely.

“Of course I feel something for you,” he said. “Can’t you see I feel

everything for you, all the love I have, I've ever had belongs to you. Day after day I'd work at your statue, watching you grow before my eyes, remembering the beauty of you, the touch of you. I knew you were back from Italy but I daren't contact you, and I prayed that you wouldn't contact me."

"But why, Georges, why?"

"I've told you, our love just cannot be."

"Neither of us are married, we're both free, why can't it be?"

She stood looking at him, her head slightly on one side. Georges reached out and pulled her to him. She came easily, flowing into his arms. Her head tilted back and their mouths found each other opening under the pressure of the kiss. After a moment she pulled her face away from his and rested her head on his chest. Her eyes were alight with happiness.

"Georges, I love you so much," she said softly. He moved one hand from her back and stroked her head gently. Without looking up at him she spoke again.

"May I pose for you?" she said.

"The statue's nearly finished," said Georges.

"I know, but may I pose for you?"

He pushed her away from him and looked at her. She was blushing but she held his gaze.

"Are you sure you want to?" he said.

She nodded.

"All right," he said.

He helped her out of her clothes, undoing the dress at the back and taking it as she stepped from it. Her petticoats made a small heap on the floor as she stepped out of them. He peeled her stockings off, his hand brushing the inside of her thigh, and she shivered violently for a moment. In a few seconds she was naked before him, her breasts hard and pointed with excitement. He looked at her for a long moment, then walked to the door and locked it. When he turned round she had already moved across to the day bed and was waiting for him.

The Vienna train arrived at the Gare du Nord at 11 a.m. Fifteen minutes after arriving the platform was clear of passengers with the exception of one man. He was old, his tired eyes peering out from beneath a shock of white hair. His clothes were expensive but ill kept and he looked shabby. Beside him on the platform was a suitcase. He looked round gratefully as a man came up to him.

"Professor Weisz?" said the man.

“Ja, I am Ludwig Weisz, who are you?”

“I work for Dr. Bonner, he sent me to meet you,” said the man.

“That is kind of him,” said Ludwig. “It is kind of you also,” he said with a gentle smile. The man picked up Ludwig’s suitcase and the two of them walked towards the station entrance.

Georges rolled over on one elbow and looked at Janine. He thought she was sleeping until she opened her eyes and looked at him. Then she smiled, a tired satisfied smile of contentment. He reached out and traced a line with his finger, up her arm, across her shoulder, then down across her breast. Her nipple hardened under his finger, and she opened her eyes again and looked at him questioningly. He removed his hand and smiled at her.

“I have work to do,” he said. He got out of bed and she watched him while he dressed. He was just putting his coat on when there was a knock on the door. They flashed a glance at one another.

“Who is it?” said Georges.

“It’s Roget, sir,” came the voice from the other side of the door.

“What do you want?”

“The gentleman has arrived, sir, he’s downstairs.”

“Tell him I’ll be right down,” said Georges, unable to keep the excitement out of his voice. Then he turned to Janine.

“You must excuse me, my darling,” he said. “I have waited so long for Ludwig to arrive.”

Without waiting for her answer he walked quickly to the door. He unlocked it and turned back to Janine. “You’d better lock the door after me,” he said.

Janine nodded and watched him go out. Then she padded across the room and re-locked the door. She returned to where her clothes were piled on the back of a chair and started to dress.

Ludwig was standing in the hall as Georges came downstairs. He looked up as he heard Georges’ voice.

“Ludwig.” Georges ran down the last few stairs and embraced the old man. “Ludwig, my dear old friend, it is so good to see you.”

Ludwig pushed Georges to arms’ length. There were tears of happiness in his eyes.

“Georges, let me look at you.” He looked at Georges who was grinning like an excited schoolboy.

Then he shook his head in wonderment.

“This is good, you look wonderful. I was worried.”

“Worried?”

“That I was late.”

“I knew you wouldn’t let me down,” said Georges. Then a new excitement appeared in Ludwig’s eyes.

“You have found the ultimate answer, Georges, is that it?”

“Later, Ludwig, let’s talk later. Aren’t you forgetting something?”

Ludwig looked puzzled. Georges took him by the arm and led him into the study. There he pointed towards a silver salver set with a bottle of champagne on ice and two glasses. Ludwig smiled.

“Of course,” he said. “Our little ceremony. I have been ill you understand, that is why I am late, it has affected my memory also it seems.”

Georges moved over to the table and started to unwrap the foil from around the bottle. Ludwig looked around the room.

“You have not forgotten how to live, Georges,” he said.

Georges looked up from where he was pouring the champagne.

“What is the point of doing what we are doing if one does not enjoy life and what it has to offer.”

He carried the two glasses across towards Ludwig, holding one out for Ludwig to take. Ludwig looked at him for a moment, his head on one side.

“What is the point, as you say,” he said. Ludwig took his right hand from his pocket where it had remained until now, and reached out for the glass. Immediately he realized his mistake and withdrew his hand, stuffing it back into his pocket. But Georges’ face was a study of horror.

“Your hand, Ludwig, what’s wrong with your hand?”

Ludwig said nothing for a moment, just jamming his right hand deeper into his pocket.

Georges put down the two glasses and turned to Ludwig again.

“Let me see it,” he said.

Ludwig shook his head.

“It is not necessary.”

“Let me see it,” said Georges, almost shouting.

Reluctantly Ludwig drew his hand from his pocket and held it up in front of Georges. It was quivering uncontrollably, shaking as though Ludwig had no control over it. Georges took it gently, feeling it, turning it over and pressing the joints experimentally. Ludwig watched him carefully.

“I had a stroke,” he said quietly, “That is why I was not here sooner. This is the legacy it left me.”

Georges released the hand and Ludwig stuffed it into his pocket quickly as though he were ashamed of it.

“Why didn’t you let me know?” asked Georges.

“I was frightened to. And I hoped you would have found the answer by now, then it would not have mattered. You have not found it, Georges?”

Georges turned away.

“No, I haven’t found it. The operation is still necessary.”

There was a moment’s silence.

“I cannot do it,” said Ludwig finally.

“With your left hand?”

Ludwig shook his head.

“No, Georges, we must find someone else.”

“But that’s impossible.”

“Why is it impossible? We always knew that if we didn’t find the ultimate solution there would have to be another surgeon some day. Perhaps the stroke would have killed me.”

“But it didn’t,” said Georges, his voice rising, “It didn’t.” He leaned close to Ludwig.

“Three weeks I have been waiting, Ludwig. Three weeks. I’m taking the fluid every six hours now.”

Ludwig backed away in horror.

“Six hours . . . that is madness.”

“It’s what keeps me alive,” said Georges. “Don’t you see you must operate. You know what will happen to me if you don’t.”

Ludwig nodded.

“Ja, I know, you will die,” he said slowly.

“Don’t be so smug about it,” said Georges angrily. “You’re old, you can see death staring you in the face. I’m not old . . . I’m not going to die . . . I’m going to live.”

“Then you must find someone else to do the operation,” said Ludwig calmly.

Georges turned away and started to pace up and down.

“But who . . . whom can we get,” he said.

“We need a young surgeon,” said Ludwig. “That is all, a young surgeon. We tell him just enough to satisfy him, and I am with him all the time he is doing the operation. It is far better this way, Georges. At least for the first time I will be there to show him what to do. Next time if you still haven’t found the ultimate solution and you need an operation I will not be here, I shall be dead.”

“But we have so little time,” said Georges.

“You’re a doctor,” said Ludwig. “You must have met other doctors, someone who will do it.”

“I don’t . . .” Georges started, and was interrupted by a knock on the door.

“Come in,” he said. The door opened and Roget came in.

“What is it, Roget?” said Georges shortly.

“Mademoiselle Dubois is leaving, sir,” said Roget.

Georges had forgotten all about Janine. He moved towards the door.

“Janine, come in, my dear.”

Roget stood aside as Janine came in, then moved away closing the door behind him. Georges took Janine by the hand and led her towards Ludwig.

“Janine, I want to introduce you to my oldest and dearest friend. This is Ludwig Weisz, Ludwig, this is Mademoiselle Janine Dubois.”

Ludwig made a courtly old-world bow.

“I am delighted to meet you, my dear,” he said. Janine smiled.

“It’s nice to meet a friend of Georges’,” she said. “Especially such a good one.”

Then she turned to Georges.

“Obviously you and Professor Weisz have a lot to talk about,” she said. “I’ll leave you both alone.”

Georges took her arm and led her towards the door. At the door she turned back to Ludwig.

“I hope I’ll see you again, Professor.”

“I hope so too, my dear,” said Ludwig.

Then Georges had an idea, he looked down at Janine.

“Why not come to dinner tonight?”

Janine smiled. “I’d love to,” she said.

“Bring Gerrard along with you,” said Georges.

“Pierre,” said Janine, surprised. “Why?”

“He seemed like a nice enough fellow last night,” said Georges.

Janine looked worried.

“I don’t know whether he’ll come,” she said. “He’s very busy, I know.”

Georges opened the door and walked into the hall with her.

“Tell him Professor Ludwig Weisz of Vienna is here. He’ll come,” he said.

She looked at him for a moment, then she nodded. “All right,

Georges, if that's what you would like."

They walked to the front door together. There, Georges put his arms round her.

"Until tonight," he said.

"Georges, it means so much to me seeing you again."

"It does to me too, my darling," said Georges. He bent down and kissed her on the mouth. She responded ardently for a moment, then pulled herself away.

"*Au revoir*," she said as she opened the front door.

Georges watched her as she reached the gate and turned into the Rue Noir, then he stepped back into the hall and closed the door behind him. He stayed for a moment, leaning up against the door, then he looked up towards the study. Ludwig was standing there, a questioning look on his tired old face.

"This Monsieur Gerrard . . . he is a doctor?" he said.

Georges moved towards the study and they both went in.

"He's a surgeon," he said as he closed the door behind him.

"You think he will do it?" asked Ludwig.

"That's up to you," said Georges. "If he's convinced that you give the operation your blessing, then he'll do it."

"Why should he be influenced by what I do?" said Ludwig.

Georges smiled.

"You are still the same, old friend. You cannot recognize the fact that you are a great man. One of the greatest in your own field. There's no medical man who would miss the chance of meeting you, let alone working with you."

"Half of what makes up this reputation you speak of belongs to you. More than half," said Ludwig.

"You and I know that, but nobody else does."

"Why not, Georges, why don't we tell them, publish our findings."

A shadow passed across Georges' face.

"Please, Ludwig, allow me to decide when to publish."

Ludwig looked at him steadily for a moment. "All right, Georges," he said finally. "Perhaps you are right. You have more invested in this than I have. Anyway I shall probably not be around to see the consequences. I am very tired, and like you said just now, I can see death staring me in the face."

"I didn't mean that, Ludwig."

"Nevertheless it's true. It's strange about getting old, Georges. One suddenly has no future to look forward to and one is forced to turn back and survey the past. You can see the highlights of your life

stretching away behind you, the right and the wrong moves and decisions, the happiness and the sorrow. I have thought much of what we have done, Georges, what we are trying to do. Do you remember our original toast, the one we made the first time we knew we had succeeded?"

"I remember," said Georges.

"Say it."

"For humanity."

"That's right," said Ludwig. "For humanity. Not for me, not for you, Georges, but for all people."

"I know what it means," said Georges, a trifle shortly. Ludwig looked at him.

"Do you, Georges. Sometimes I wonder a little, you have changed so much since we started."

"That's hardly surprising."

"I'm talking about our original ideals. Bright, shining ideals, full of promise for a brave new world. What happened to them, Georges? Where did they get lost?"

"Why do you say they're lost?"

"I think they are," said Ludwig. "I have thought much on what we are doing. I think that the years have brought me an added insight that enables me to see more clearly."

Georges lifted a hand.

"Wait a minute, Ludwig," he said. "You are forgetting something aren't you?"

Ludwig looked puzzled.

"You still have the photograph," said Georges gently.

Ludwig started to dig in his pocket.

"Ja, I still have it," he said. "I always keep it with me."

He pulled a wallet from his pocket and opened it with fumbling hands. From it he extracted a faded yellow photographic print. He held it at arms' length, looking at it fondly.

"What do you see, Ludwig?" asked Georges.

"You know what I see," said Ludwig. "I see us both when we first started."

"You see a photograph of two young men," said Georges. "Two men, one older than the other. You are one of the men, Ludwig, a fresh-faced young doctor full of ambition, ready to take on the whole world and bring it to his feet. And the other man, Ludwig, the older of the two. Who do you see?"

Ludwig looked up at Georges.

“I see you, Georges,” he said.

“Exactly,” said Georges. “So remember, Ludwig, when you talk of the wisdom and insight that old age has brought you, remember I too have this wisdom and insight. How old are you?”

“Eighty-nine.”

“Then look at the photograph again and let it remind you that I am fifteen years older than you are. While you have the wisdom that comes with a life of eighty-nine years, I have that which comes with a life of a hundred and four.”

## CHAPTER THREE

Dinner was an unqualified success. Ludwig kept them laughing through most of the meal, as he recalled his student days sixty-five years earlier. Towards the dessert he and Pierre Gerrard became involved in a technical discussion on surgery. Considering he hadn't practised for a number of years, Ludwig showed a remarkable familiarity with modern methods of surgery and treatment. Pierre remarked on this and Ludwig smiled.

"All I have left to me now is my head. My hands are too old to serve me any longer so I have to rely on what I can do with my mind. I read, Dr. Gerrard, oh how prodigiously I read. There's not a paper or book on medicine published in Europe that I haven't got to get my greedy old hands on. When I consider some of the advances made since I retired, I could weep with frustration that I am no longer a part of them."

"You had a great deal to do with a number of them, sir, you should be proud."

Ludwig shrugged. "I did what I could. I think if every man can grow old saying this, he will die happy."

"Let's have no talk of dying at my table," said Georges.

"I was very interested in your theories about the uter-parathyroid gland, Professor. I made them a part of my thesis when I was at university," said Pierre.

"I am flattered," said Ludwig, flashing a glance at Georges.

"I didn't agree with it all, of course," said Pierre.

"Why 'of course,' Dr. Gerrard?" cut in Georges.

"I think Professor Weisz exaggerated the rejuvenating powers of the gland. Theoretically you could have been right, but practically I doubt it."

"Why do you doubt it, Doctor?" said Ludwig.

"The surgery involved was of no importance," said Pierre. "It was the instilling into the . . ."

Here, Georges banged his hand on the table. They all looked towards him.

"Gentlemen," he said with a smile. "If this discussion is going to go any deeper into technicalities, I suggest you both retire to the study. I for one am tired of medicine for the day, and I'm sure our charming lady guest feels the same way."

Pierre was about to apologize and change the subject when Ludwig got to his feet.

“You’re right Georges. Come, Dr. Gerrard.” He pushed his chair back and started towards the door. After a moment Pierre stood up too and turned to Janine.

“I hope you will excuse me,” he said.

“Of course she will,” said Ludwig from the door. “Come on.”

Pierre followed Ludwig out and the door closed behind him. There was silence in the room for a moment then Georges reached out and placed his hand on Janine’s. Janine smiled.

“Pierre seems very impressed with your Professor Weisz,” she said.

“I told you he would be.”

“When I mentioned his name Pierre said I must be wrong. He thought he was dead.”

“Ludwig has been retired for a long time now.”

“He seems a dear old man. Have you known him long?”

“All my life, we used to work together.”

“He must have been very patient.”

“Why patient?”

“He’s old. The older generation don’t have much sympathy with people our age.”

“Yes, I see. Yes, he was very patient.”

Georges lifted her hand and kissed the palm.

“I can’t tell you what it means to have you back again. I missed you terribly,” he said.

“You needn’t have, you knew that.”

“Yes, I knew it, but there was nothing I could do about it.”

“You still haven’t told me why you tried to avoid loving me.” She smiled at him. “Something happened to interrupt our discussion this morning.”

But Georges didn’t smile. He released her hand and looked at her steadily.

“I have to go away,” he said carefully.

“Go away, where?”

“Where isn’t important,” he said. “What matters is that I shall have to leave Paris very soon.”

“But you’ll be back?”

Georges shook his head.

“No, my dear, I won’t be coming back.”

“Why?

“I can’t, that’s all . . . don’t ask me why.”

“Of course I ask you why. Why? Why?” A note of desperation was creeping into her voice. He took her hand again.

“Please darling, don’t make it hard for me.”

She snatched her hand away.

“Hard for you. What about me. You can’t just sit there and say you’re going away for ever without giving me a reason.”

“My work makes it necessary.”

“Because you are a doctor?”

Georges shrugged. “That’s partly it,” he said. “You see I must travel where no man has been before. I want to lift the curtain of life and see what lies beyond. To do this it is necessary that I go away, there’s no alternative.”

“But is it necessary that you go alone?”

The remark hung in the air between them for a moment, then Georges shook his head.

“No, it’s impossible.”

But Janine had seen a chink in his defences, now she proceeded to drive in the wedge.

“I could go with you, Georges, we could be together always. I could help you in your work, you’d be surprised how practical I can be when I want to.”

Georges looked up at her.

“It would mean giving up everything, everyone you love,” he said.

“You’re the one I love.”

“Your parents?”

Her face fell for a moment, then she pulled herself together. “I don’t care, just so long as we could be together. That’s the only thing that matters to me now.”

Georges seemed to lose himself in thought for a few moments.

“It could work,” he said to himself. “It could work.”

In the study Ludwig and Pierre were deep in conversation. They were sitting in arm-chairs on either side of the fire, which was burning steadily. Pierre was talking. “. . . it’s the abdominal wall that provides the problems in such cases, the damn thing is so muscular it needs a professional strong man to pull it out of the way.”

“A surgeon needs to be a strong man,” said Ludwig. “A strong man, a gentle man, an artist, a practitioner, a confessor, a bully, a thought reader, a natural leader, and one who is prepared to be led.”

Pierre smiled. "With all those qualifications you'd think the pay would be more remunerative."

"Please, Dr. Gerrard, we surgeons shouldn't have to discuss the sordid realities of money, we are held to be above such things. We're not supposed to exist outside the operating theatre. What should we need money for, food perhaps, and a roof?"

Pierre looked around the study, heavy with its warm opulence.

"Dr. Bonner manages very nicely, it seems."

"Georges is one of these rarities, a successful surgeon who is also a good one."

"Good surgery can be achieved by hard work," said Pierre. "Successful surgery by good luck."

"You must make your own luck, Dr. Gerrard. It isn't enough to work hard and let opportunities pass you by. When you see them you must grab them and hold on with both hands. That way they will carry you along with them."

"You've got to be able to recognize them first," said Pierre.

"Recognize them, or create them yourself. Delve into what is still unknown, discover a cure for what is believed incurable, a new method of surgery, a new approach. These are the stepping stones to success."

"I'll leave that to those who are suited to the job."

"You lack the spirit of the pioneer, Dr. Gerrard. Without that we'd still be in the Middle Ages."

"I'm content to follow the well-worn tracks."

"Then all this will never be yours," said Ludwig, his hand embracing the study. He leaned forward. "Don't you ever get the feeling that you would like to make your own trail. You in the lead, the rest following behind you."

"Sometimes," admitted Pierre. "But surgery is a practical business. It's necessary first to make a living, however humble. That doesn't leave much time for exploring."

"But if you had the opportunity," said Ludwig. "If someone came to you and said here is a field of medical science that has been dreamed about since time began, and by doing one simple operation you could become one of the pioneers, what would you say to them?"

"First I'd say that no operation is simple. Some are less difficult than others. Then I should want to know what this operation involved, and what was the field I was supposed to be pioneering."

"What if it were impossible to explain the exact nature of the research right away . . . if you were asked to leave it on trust?"

“Then I should say no.”

“Regardless of who was talking to you?”

Pierre looked up quickly at Ludwig. The old man was regarding him steadily.

“Professor Weisz,” said Pierre after a moment. “When you started this conversation I was under the impression we were talking hypothetically. Are we?”

“No, we are not,” said Ludwig.

Pierre stood up. For a moment he fiddled idly with a jade ornament on the mantelpiece. Then he turned to Ludwig who was watching him carefully.

“I should be annoyed at this verbal subterfuge,” he said finally. “I don’t know why I’m not. Suppose you tell me what it is that you’ve asked me here for.”

Ludwig removed his right hand from his pocket where it had been all evening. He held it up for Pierre to see. Pierre looked at the shaking hand, then up at Ludwig.

“I assumed your arm was incapacitated earlier this evening. What about it?”

“My right hand,” said Ludwig, pushing it back into his pocket. “The one I would use if I were going to operate. I came to Paris for one reason, Dr. Gerrard, to save the life of Georges Bonner by performing an operation that only I know how to perform. You see, it is impossible for me to do it, therefore I am asking you to take my place.”

“And the operation?” said Pierre carefully.

“In spite of what you said earlier,” said Ludwig. “This one really is simple. It involves the removal of the uter-parathyroid gland.”

“You said it was to save Bonner’s life.”

“I hadn’t finished,” said Ludwig. “To remove the gland and substitute an alternative.”

“Why?”

“Is it necessary to know the reason to perform the operation?”

“Physically, no, but morally, I think so,” said Pierre.

Ludwig smiled. “Would you be prepared to leave the protection of your morals in my hands?” he said.

“I’m not sure,” said Pierre.

“Look at it this way,” said Ludwig. “I am asking you to perform an operation which, even you must admit, is extremely simple and straightforward. I am personally guaranteeing that there can be no ill effects. On the contrary, unless the operation is performed, and very

soon, Georges Bonner will die."

"I find that hard to believe, he looks perfectly healthy to me," said Pierre.

"Take my word for it," said Ludwig, "he will die."

"I agree the operation is simple," said Pierre. "But you can hardly call it straightforward. It's never been done before."

"Actually, I have done it myself, many times. But you agree with me that the only reason it hasn't been done is because it has never been necessary to do so. There are no moral or legal aspects involved."

"I suppose not," said Pierre. "As long as the patient is willing."

"He's willing," said Ludwig.

Pierre sat down again, looking into the fire for a long moment. Then he looked up at Ludwig. "You will be there all the time, you'll lend your name to it?" he said.

Ludwig nodded. "I will," he said.

"Very well then, I'll do it."

Ludwig let out a long audible sigh of relief.

"Good," he said. He started to get to his feet. "Now you will come with me and I will show you what has to be done."

He walked over to the laboratory and opened the door. He stood aside and let Pierre precede him in. Inside Pierre looked around him curiously. The first thing which took his attention was a half completed crate standing against the wall. The crate contained the bust of Margo Philippe which he had seen unveiled the night before.

"Where's that going?" he said as Ludwig lit the oil lamp on the bench. Ludwig looked across at the bust.

"I don't know," he said. "Georges sends his work away somewhere when he has finished it. I don't know where."

He wound the wick of the lamp up, then stood back.

"We will do the operation here," he said.

Pierre looked around him.

"Wouldn't it be better in a proper theatre?" he said. "Next door in the clinic?"

"It is better here," said Ludwig. "We don't want people to know the doctor is sick. It's bad for the morale of the patients," he added with a smile. He moved across to a cupboard and opened it exposing rows of gleaming surgical instruments nestling in soft velvet-lined trays.

"We have all the necessary tools," he said.

Pierre walked over and looked at the instruments, then he turned to Ludwig.

"I'd rather bring my own," he said. "I'm used to them, I can work

better.”

“Of course,” said Ludwig. “It is of no importance.”

“You said earlier that the operation involved the replacing of the uter-parathyroid gland, what you didn’t tell me, is where this replacement is to come from,” said Pierre.

“We have it,” said Ludwig. “And don’t let your imagination run away with you. It has been removed from a cadaver that was bound for the anatomy room at the university. Georges tells me it is all perfectly legal.”

“A dead gland,” said Pierre. “What use can that be?”

“Many years ago I perfected a system of revitalizing the gland after it was removed from the cadaver. It has proved satisfactory providing the time lag between removing the gland and revitalization wasn’t too great.”

Pierre turned from the cabinet.

“That seems to be all,” he said.

“It does,” said Ludwig. “Will ten o’clock tomorrow morning be all right?”

“I had an appointment,” said Pierre. “But I could cancel it.”

Ludwig nodded. “Good,” he said. “Then it is all arranged. Now shall we rejoin the others?”

Meanwhile Georges was still measuring the effect of Janine’s words about accompanying him on his journey into the unknown. Janine was proving extremely persuasive, blocking each objection as Georges made it and gradually Georges was losing ground.

“Wherever it is, Georges, you can give me no practical reason why I should not come with you. Oh I know you’ve told me I shan’t be able to contact anyone once I go, and I’m prepared to accept it. Just as I am prepared to accept that once we go, there is no turning back. I don’t understand it but I accept it.”

“You would have to place all your trust in me,” said Georges. “Even if I were unable to explain some of my actions, you would still have to trust me to know that what I am doing is the correct thing for us both.”

She smiled. “Of course I place my trust in you,” she said. “You should know that.”

And quite suddenly Georges made up his mind. Further objections that demanded to be heard he pushed back into the unseen recesses of his mind. Sufficient to deal with them when the time came. And with the acceptance of what he was going to do, came a flood of relief that washed over him like a soothing tide. He took Janine’s hand and

looked into her eyes.

“Very well, my darling. You shall come with me. There are many things that must be done, many arrangements to make. I can’t tell you exactly where we will be going, but it will be soon, very soon. Trust me and my love for you and I will show you a life that you’ve never dreamed of, a life which will stretch out beyond the boundaries of time itself. A life . . .”

He was cut short by a discreet cough outside the door which opened a moment later to admit Ludwig and Pierre.

“Dr. Gerrard must leave now, Georges,” said Ludwig.

Georges stood up. “So soon?” he said as Pierre came in behind Ludwig.

“May I drop you at your home, Janine?”

Janine looked up towards Georges who nodded. She turned back to Pierre.

“Thank you, Pierre,” she said. She sounded disappointed. She got to her feet and they all moved out into the hall.

As Georges was helping Janine into her cloak, there was a knock at the door. Roget appeared in the door that led to the servants’ quarters, but Georges waved him back.

“Never mind, Roget, I’ll get it.” He walked over to the door and opened it.

“Good evening,” said the man on the doorstep. “I’d like to speak to Dr. Georges Bonner.”

“I’m Bonner,” said Georges. What can I do for you?”

“My name is Legris, Inspector Legris from the Sûreté.”

All that day Legris had been worried. He was a methodical man. He liked things to behave with proper regard to their relative position in the overall pattern. And here was a case that was bristling with conflicting facts and theories. The little man who had been dragged out of the lake had been duly identified as one Jean Le Fleur, confirming the evidence of the wallet taken from his body. By careful questioning and observation Legris had built for himself a composite picture of the man’s life up to that point. A junior clerk by profession, and destined it seemed, always to have remained one. Without drive, without ambition, he had moved in a circle bounded by his home, ruled over by his wife, and his office ruled over by his immediate superior. So far so good, had thought Legris. Then came the business of the prostitute. She had told him that Le Fleur had been a once-a-week regular, punctual, precise, and paying for his pleasure without quibbling. This also fitted into a pattern. There were many men who

expended a few francs here and there to buy something they didn't seem to be able to get at home. Then the pattern jerked sharply out of focus. Why had Le Fleur been killed, what possible motive could there have been? In the sodden wallet that Legris had taken from the dead man there had been some money. Not much admittedly, but certainly more than would have been overlooked by a thief. So robbery was not the motive. Rejected love perhaps, a boy friend of the prostitute. But exhaustive questioning had only served to show that the girl had no lovers in the true sense of the word, and as far as Le Fleur was concerned he was purely a customer. The work of a maniac thought Legris. The deep-seated abdominal incision pointed in that direction, but even this didn't ring true. The police doctor had said the man was rendered unconscious, then the incision was made, killing him probably, then the body had been deposited in the lake. It was all too neat and methodical to be the work of a maniac. Legris had once investigated and finally trapped one of those mad killers. The unfortunate victims of this man had been slashed almost beyond recognition. There was certainly nothing there to parallel the neat surgical precision of the knife wound in Le Fleur's case. The police doctor had mentioned something about a gland, something about there not being a gland where there should have been. So there was no gland, perhaps Le Fleur had gone through life without one. Legris attached no importance to this statement. Then to add to his troubles, that afternoon, a note had been placed on his desk. A woman had disappeared. She should have been home the night before, but she didn't turn up, and this morning it was found her bed had not been slept in. So she slept somewhere else, Legris thought, as he pushed the note aside. Then he noticed the signature on the note. It was from the Commissioner. Legris went to see the commissioner who told him that the girl came from an important home and that action was required immediately on the case. When he mentioned that he was already working on a case he was told to forget it for the present and concentrate on finding this girl, Margo Philippe. Being methodical Legris liked to clear up a job before he started another, but the Commissioner was the Commissioner, and Legris dismissed the Le Fleur matter to the back of his mind and went to see the girl's parents. The last they knew of their daughter she was going to a reception at the home of Doctor Georges Bonner, who was that night going to unveil a bust he had completed of her. After that nothing. So Legris came to 13, Rue Noir.

"Come in Inspector," said Bonner stepping back. Legris thought there might have been a moment of hesitation, a moment of doubt before he spoke, but it was too fleeting for Legris to pin it down. There were

three people in the hall apart from Bonner and himself. A very lovely girl, another man, and one very old gentleman whom Legris liked on sight.

“What can I do for you, Inspector?” said Bonner politely.

“I wonder if I might have a couple of words with you, sir,” said Legris.

“Is it private?” said Bonner.

“No sir, not particularly.”

“Then you won’t mind if my friends are present,” said Bonner.

“Not at all,” said Legris. If Bonner didn’t mind, why should he.

“Now what’s it all about Inspector?” said Bonner with a charming smile.

“Purely routine,” said Legris.

“Relating to what?”

“Relating to the apparent disappearance of one Margo Philippe.”

“Margo? I’m sorry, I don’t understand.”

“You know the young lady, sir?”

“Yes, I do.”

“When did you last see her?”

“Yesterday,” said Bonner without hesitation. “I had a small reception here. She was the guest of honour. You met, didn’t you, Gerrard?” he said, turning to the other man. “This is Dr. Gerrard, Inspector,” he added. Legris nodded at the introduction.

“The young girl you modelled?” said Gerrard.

“That’s right,” said Bonner.

“I didn’t meet her, but I saw her of course,” said Gerrard.

“You saw her leave?” asked Legris.

“Not that I remember,” said Gerrard. The woman looked at him.

“We left first, Pierre, remember,” she said. Then she turned towards Legris. “My name is Janine Dubois, Inspector, I was here last night with Dr. Gerrard. We didn’t see the lady leave because we were the first to go.”

“Thank you, mademoiselle,” said Legris. He turned to Bonner again.

“You saw her leave of course, sir,” he said.

Bonner frowned, and Legris thought what a remarkably handsome man he was. A real lady-killer he imagined.

“I think so,” said Bonner, “Yes, I’m sure I did. What’s happened to her, Inspector?”

“We don’t know,” said Legris. “She’s disappeared. There’s no trace of her whatsoever. She didn’t return to her home last night, and it

seems the last place she was seen alive was here."

"That's terrible," said Miss Dubois. "What could have happened?"

"A number of things could have happened," said Legris. "It's up to me to determine the one that did. This statue that you did of her, Doctor Bonner, may I see it."

"Why?" said Bonner.

"As I have never seen the young lady it would help me in my investigations if I knew what she looked like."

There seemed to be a fractional pause before Bonner answered.

"I'm sorry Inspector, I no longer have the statue."

"But I . . ." said Gerrard, and stopped. Legris looked at him.

"Yes sir? You were going to say?"

"Nothing, it doesn't matter," said Gerrard. Was Legris imagining things or was Gerrard looking towards Bonner with a peculiar expression on his face. Legris turned back to Bonner. "Perhaps you could tell me who does have it," he said.

"It was broken, Inspector. A stupid accident this morning. I was touching up a section of the plinth and I knocked the whole thing over. It was smashed to pieces."

"I see," said Legris. "Most unfortunate." He turned towards the front door.

"Thank you, Doctor, that will be all for the moment."

"You'll let me know if you have any news won't you, Inspector," said Bonner.

"I'll let you know," said Legris, as Bonner opened the door for him. He turned to the others.

"I'm sorry to have troubled you. Good night."

They chorused their good nights as Legris left, Bonner shutting the door behind him.

Outside he stood for a moment thinking on what had been said. Then after a moment he shrugged and moved down the path. With an unsolved murder on his plate, worrying about a missing girl was very trying.

Georges shut the door behind Legris and turned to face the others.

"Poor Margo," he said. "I wonder what could have happened to her."

"You know that statue is in your laboratory," said Pierre.

There was a momentary pause before Georges answered. He had forgotten Pierre had been in the laboratory. Then he smiled.

"Yes I knew," he said.

“Why didn’t you tell him, Georges?” said Janine. “He only wanted to see it.”

“He would have wanted to take it away with him, I know how the police mind works. I’d have been fortunate if I had ever seen it again.”

Pierre moved towards the door.

“Thank you for the dinner, Bonner,” he said.

Georges opened the door.

“Good night to you both, thank you for coming.”

Janine stopped opposite him.

“Good night, Georges,” she said.

Georges smiled at her.

“Good night, Janine,” then quietly so the others couldn’t hear, “I love you, my darling!”

She smiled at him radiantly, then she turned and walked a few steps to where Pierre was waiting for her. Georges watched them until they turned out of the gate, then he shut the door and turned to face Ludwig who was watching him with a melancholic expression on his kind old face.

“Well?” said Georges.

Ludwig said nothing as he turned and walked into the study. Georges followed him in closing the door behind him.

“Well, Ludwig, come on tell me,” he said impatiently.

Ludwig looked up at him and nodded his head.

“Ja, he will do it,” he said.

Georges smiled his delight.

“Then all our troubles are over . . . we must drink to it,” he said walking over towards the table where the liquor was kept.

“What happened to that girl, Georges?”

Georges hesitated for a fraction, the bottle poised over the glass.

“I wish I knew, poor little thing.”

Ludwig covered the ground between them surprisingly fast for a man of his age. He pulled Georges round to face him causing Georges to spill some of the drink he was pouring.

“What happened to her, Georges?”

“How should I know?” said Georges.

“This is Ludwig you are talking to, not the policeman. What happened to her?”

“Ludwig, I don’t know, otherwise I would have said.”

He turned away, moving towards the fireplace.

“When is Gerrard going to operate?” he said.

But Ludwig persisted.

“The girl, what have you done?”

“What’s the matter with you, Ludwig?” said Georges. “I told you I don’t know anything about the girl.” He moved back and put his hand on Ludwig’s shoulder.

“You must be tired,” he said gently. “Why don’t you go to bed.”

Ludwig shook his hand away angrily.

“Stop treating me like a child, Georges,” he said.

Georges looked at him for a moment, then he swallowed his drink.

“Well I’m going to bed even if you’re not,” he said.

He moved towards the door.

“It’ll be all right in the morning, you’ll see,” he said as he went out of the door.

After he had gone Ludwig stood alone for a minute, his body drooping. Suddenly he looked his eighty odd years. He looked a very tired, very old man. Then he turned round and walked into the laboratory. He lit the lamp and sat at one of the benches. After a moment he put his hands to his head and leaned forward resting his elbows on the bench.

“What has happened?” he said. “Where did we go wrong? Where did we go wrong?”

## CHAPTER FOUR

The beginning of the nineteenth century showed a turning point in the progress of medicine. Surgery commenced to grope its way out of the shadows that had surrounded it in mystery and fear, towards the sane and practical methods that formed the foundations of the present-day art. Nowhere was this change more apparent than in Vienna. At the great State Medical University, students and lecturers came from all over the world. The teaching staff was recognized as being the most able and liberal minded faculty in all Europe. It was to this University came the young Ludwig Weisz. Son of a middle class merchant, his entry to the University did not have parental approval. His father had hoped Ludwig would enter the family business, but the boy had shown such a marked indifference to the world of commerce, and such a great enthusiasm towards medicine that Weisz Senior reluctantly agreed that his son could enrol in the University. Secretly he hoped that a few months in the clinical, bloody atmosphere of the University would cure forever the boy's desire to become a doctor, and he contrived to hang on to the hope that one day the sign Weisz and Son could hang over his business premises. From the outset Ludwig proved his father wrong. He revelled in the very atmosphere his father had hoped would distress him. He was a slight young man, of undistinguished appearance and never became popular with the other students, who were fond of a certain amount of horse play both during and after working hours. The bell signifying the end of class would be greeted by a general stampede in the direction of the door, but Ludwig was never part of this stampede. He would always be the last person left in the classroom, finishing his notes, checking the result of an experiment, or completing a dissection. He worked hard both in and out of the classroom and it was no surprise to anyone that he finished his first year top of the class, with a large gap between himself and the next student. His father now relented, and became immensely proud of the success that Ludwig was having. He would regale his friends with tales of his son's prowess, never mentioning the fact that he had been against the plan at the beginning.

During his second year, Ludwig found that the members of the staff were showing more interest in him than in the other students. Like all teachers they liked to see their seeds of learning fall on to fertile ground. So Ludwig found himself the recipient of extra attention which in turn helped him to keep ahead of the rest of the class, and increase the lead that he already possessed.

It was during this second year that Georges Beauchamp entered the University. It didn't take Ludwig long to find out that the new arrival was already a practising doctor and had enrolled purely to take a course of surgery. He was fifteen years older than Ludwig, and at the time when he had taken his degree, surgery was still poised on the threshold of maturity. Now fifteen years later there was a vast new concept to be taken in, and Georges had chosen to learn the new methods from the beginning, rather than to rely on the papers that were published spasmodically for the benefit of practising surgeons. Being older than the remainder of the students, Georges tended to keep to himself and it was natural that he and Ludwig should find themselves together a great deal. At the end of a class of anatomy, after the general stampede to the door, Ludwig would look up from the limb he was working on and see Georges across the room still probing and cutting.

They would eventually leave the classroom together. Georges to return to his practice in the City, Ludwig to move on to the next class. For Georges had enrolled for surgery only, and he was only occupied at the University for two or three hours a day. But gradually the two men grew close together, the bond being formed partially from Ludwig's hero worship of Georges, and partially by Georges' respect for the mind of the younger man.

One evening Georges came to dinner at Ludwig's house, reconfirming to Ludwig's father that his son had made the right decision in wanting to become a doctor. Georges was obviously successful, he dressed well, he was an intelligent conversationalist, and had a natural charm which won completely the Weisz parents. Weisz Senior was left with the feeling that if his son turned out even half the man that Georges Beauchamp appeared to be, he was well satisfied.

At the end of Ludwig's second year, he and Georges celebrated together. Again Ludwig had surprised no one by finishing a long way ahead of the remainder of the class. Georges, already possessing a degree, had taken no exams, but he celebrated with Ludwig nevertheless. The two men became riotously drunk together and Ludwig was introduced for the first time to the non clinical delights of the opposite sex. In his youth he had groped ineffectively and come away with the impression that sex was a much overrated pastime and good for breeding and not much else. Now under the guidance of a girl Georges introduced him to, he revised his opinion. He and Georges would have a party once a week, usually at George's house, where they would invite their current girl friends and Ludwig began to realize what he had been missing. It seemed that Georges had an inexhaustible supply of female company, and while Ludwig was

inclined to stick to the same companion week after week, Georges never appeared with the same girl twice.

It was good fun, and Ludwig started to enjoy life immensely, until one day he appeared in Georges' office looking distraught with worry.

“She’s pregnant, Georges,” he said.

“Who is?”

“Magda.”

Magda was Ludwig’s girl friend, a pleasant faced girl of twenty two, with a comfortable body and a way of using it that was pure delight to Ludwig.

“Who told you,” said Georges.

“She told me herself. I believe her too,” said Ludwig. “I suppose I’ll have to marry her.”

Georges threw back his head and roared with laughter. Ludwig looked at him, bewildered.

“What’s so funny,” he said.

“The thought of you marrying Magda,” said Georges.

“But she’s pregnant,” persisted Ludwig.

“Well, you’re a doctor, or you will be in a couple of years. Do something about it,” said Georges. Ludwig didn’t understand him at first, then realization dawned.

“An abortion?” he said, horror in his voice.

“You don’t want to marry her, do you?” said Georges.

“Of course not.”

“You don’t want her saddled with your illegitimate child, do you?”

Ludwig shook his head.

“There’s your answer then,” said Georges.

So Ludwig practised practical surgery for the first time in his life. He was a complete bundle of nerves right up to the moment of the operation, then every nerve seemed to leave his body, leaving him completely detached and clinically thorough. The simple operation was over in a matter of minutes, but Ludwig behaved as though he had just performed a major feat in surgery. Georges reminded him that what he had done was imitated all over the world by unscrupulous women, by fake practitioners, by frantic boy friends, not always with the same success admittedly, but with depressing regularity. But Ludwig was not to be shaken out of his feelings of exhilaration. He had performed an operation. Illegal though it might be, it was an operation. He took Georges out that night and they celebrated. But when Georges suggested they look for company,

Ludwig declined for once. He might have performed his first operation that day but he had no intention of having to repeat the process.

Ludwig's third and fourth years passed quickly and his final exams gave him honours in all subjects. Suddenly he found himself a fully fledged doctor and out in the world on his own. Now it was no longer a case of learning amid the seclusion and security of the University, now he was going to have to earn a living at the trade it had taken him four years to learn. He turned naturally to two people, first his father, who offered to buy him a small practice in the country, and secondly to Georges. It was Georges who provided the answer.

"Why waste yourself in the country," he said. "All you'd be doing would be lancing boils, delivering babies and sewing up cuts. You must stay in the city. This is where the work is done, this is where you'll find the interesting cases."

"My father can't afford to buy me a practice in Vienna," said Ludwig. "It's all he can do to manage a country practice, his business hasn't been too good and he's had my fees to pay for the last four years."

"Why not come and work with me," said Georges. "My practice is getting too big anyway. You can come in as a partner, we'll share the work."

Ludwig was delighted with the offer, and he told Georges so.

"Don't thank me till you see how much work you're going to have to do," said Georges. "It'll give me a chance to do more sculpting."

Ludwig smiled.

"You only do that to have an excuse to get girls to take their clothes off," he said.

"That's one of its advantages," admitted Georges. "But believe me, Ludwig, that's not the reason. I sculpt because I love it. If you gave me a choice between medicine and sculpting, there's no doubt whatsoever in my mind the one I would choose."

"You can't make a living at it," said Ludwig.

"I know. So I practise medicine. That has been a full time operation up to now. Now with my new partner I'll be able to indulge myself a little more. Is it agreed then, you come and work with me?"

"Agreed," said Ludwig.

Ludwig moved out of his father's house and into Georges'. The house was on four floors, the ground floor was for business, containing the consulting rooms and surgery. The first floor was living quarters for the two men, and Georges had knocked the whole of the third floor

into one room which he used as a studio. In the basement there was a laboratory for experimental work, very little of which had been done until now. Ludwig made this laboratory his own. When the day's work had finished he would retreat downstairs, while Georges went up to his studio. Georges had chided him about this, saying that they had enough medicine in the surgery each day, and Ludwig should find himself a distraction to relax his mind, something which, like sculpting, was nothing to do with what gave them their living.

But Ludwig didn't want a distraction, medicine was life itself to him, and towards the end of their working day he would find himself glancing at his watch, impatient for the time when he could go downstairs and start what he now considered his real work. Occasionally Georges would join him and help him in whatever he was doing at that time. But eventually Georges started to become interested, giving up more and more of his precious sculpting time to work with Ludwig. There should be no research without a goal, was Ludwig's theory, and he had set himself a goal which had at first caused Georges to laugh at him. But now, as their work progressed Georges laughed no longer, and they moved deeper and deeper into the realms of the unknown. Ludwig had developed a theory, a theory which, if proved, could answer the problem that had baffled mankind since the beginning of time. It was the theory of life. What was life that every living thing had to die eventually. Was it purely the decaying of the cells and tissues, and if so, if the decaying process could be halted or delayed, would the life span be increased. Glandular surgery had been Ludwig's specialized field at the university, and he had provided the basis for his final thesis, and it was through the glands of the body that they focused their efforts. Which gland did this and why? Why did one gland behave one way while another, apparently similar, behave differently? Why did the exocrine glands secrete towards the outside of the body, while the endocrine glands secreted towards the blood and lymph vessels? Why were some of the secretions cellular, others non-cellular? Why were some glands composed of a single cell, while others were composed of a complex organization of cells?

The more they probed and examined the more complex the problem became. One evening when they had been working for three hours Ludwig looked round as Georges straightened up from a bench and threw a scalpel on the floor.

"I'm rapidly coming to the conclusion, Ludwig, that absolutely nothing is known about glands, and that we know even less than that."

Ludwig moved over to Georges' side.

“What’s the trouble?” he said.

“No trouble,” said Georges. “It’s just that as soon as we seem to be getting somewhere and we establish what we think is a fact, something turns up to show us we’re talking nonsense.”

“Show me,” said Ludwig.

Georges showed Ludwig what he had been working on, and an hour later they stood back satisfied they had reached an adequate solution.

“That’s it, then,” said Ludwig.

“It is until we carve open another gland and find we don’t know what we’re talking about.”

“Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof,” said Ludwig with a smile. But the day never came, and gradually points that they established settled into accepted fact. They already knew far more about the structure and work of the glands than had ever been written about in the text books, and they started to compile their own system of reference, whereby it was possible to check back on any point they had worked on. Gradually this work of reference grew, until it filled six large volumes and hundreds of notes which were kept in folios in the laboratory. Ludwig would spend one day every week bringing the notes up to date and charting the progress of their experiments in the volumes.

Eventually they realized that their work was returning them repeatedly back to one particular gland. Whatever line they started out on, it invariably moved towards a little-known gland beneath the rib cage, not far beneath the surface. So little was known about this gland that it had not even been given a name. Its function in the human frame paralleled that of the thyroid, so they called it a parathyroid. It wasn’t until later when they discovered more about it, that it became the uter-parathyroid.

While there was a natural disadvantage in working on unexplored theories, there was also a definite advantage. Glands in general, and the uter-parathyroid in particular were of so little importance to medicine of the day, that Georges was able to arrange that every cadaver that found its way into the anatomy room of the university, did so minus its uter-parathyroid.

The deeper into their research they became, the more reluctant was Ludwig to give time to the workaday world of the surgery. The two men had discovered from the start that they worked well together, and now Georges found himself taking over more and more of Ludwig’s side of the practice while Ludwig remained in the laboratory for days on end. Realizing that Ludwig was better equipped mentally and temperamentally for the work of exploration, Georges allowed him his freedom and helped him when he could spare the time from

his work and from his beloved sculpting. He was a fine sculptor and his work was maturing rapidly. It provided an ideal release from his work, and when he had a lump of clay under his sensitive hands he was a happy man.

One day, a year after Ludwig had come to live with him, Georges was working in his studio on a full figure of a woman. The woman had been one of his patients, and Georges had asked her to pose for him. The statue was nearing completion and Georges was convinced that here was the best piece of work he had done to date. He was working carefully shaping the fall of hair on the shoulder, glancing every now and then at his model who was sitting under the north light window. The woman was naked to the waist and her breasts stood out prominently from the whiteness of her torso. Both she and Georges turned towards the door startled, as it suddenly crashed open to admit an excited Ludwig. He ran towards Georges.

“Georges, I’ve got it, I’ve got it . . .” Then he saw the woman in the window.

“Excuse me,” he said without any sign of dismay. Then he turned back to Georges.

“We’ve been working on a theory that the uter-parathyroid was an endocrine gland. It’s not, it has an entirely different aspect, it’s much more complex. The structure allows for . . .”

“Ludwig, please,” said Georges holding up his hand. “We can’t talk about it here.”

“Why not?”

“I think you’re embarrassing Fraulein Schmidt.”

Ludwig looked towards the woman again. She turned her back towards them, unable to reach her clothes which were hanging over the back of a chair at the other side of the room. Ludwig pulled himself together.

“Of course, my apologies, and to you, fraulein,” he said. He started backing out of the room making wild signs for Georges to get rid of his model and come down to the laboratory.

Georges spent some minutes mollifying the distressed lady, and showed her out. Then he went down to join Ludwig. Ludwig was at his bench writing furiously. He looked up as Georges came in, then returned to his writing.

“With you in a moment,” he said.

Georges waited while Ludwig finished writing. Ludwig finally pushed aside his papers and clasping his hands in front of him he looked at Georges, excitement showing in his eyes.

“Well, Ludwig?” said Georges.

“I’ve got it,” said Ludwig.

“I gathered that upstairs,” said Georges. Ludwig looked mildly distressed for a moment.

“I’m sorry about that,” he said. “Did I do any harm?”

“Only to her modesty.”

“Sit down, Georges, and listen carefully.”

Georges made himself comfortable, and when he was ready Ludwig started talking.

The technicalities were long and involved, but Georges followed them all carefully, stopping Ludwig and clarifying a point when Ludwig allowed his enthusiasm to run away with his tongue. An hour later Ludwig sat back and looked at Georges triumphantly. Georges thought carefully for a few minutes, then he started to ask questions.

“How do you rejuvenate a uter-parathyroid that comes from a dead body? The gland itself is dead, it must be re-vitalized.”

“I don’t know yet,” said Ludwig. “I shall work on it, it shouldn’t be difficult.”

Georges agreed. He asked another question, which Ludwig answered promptly, then another with the same result. Finally he sat back.

“It’s all theory, Ludwig,” he said. “It’s good, it’s logical, but it’s theory nevertheless.”

“Of course it’s theory, it can’t be anything else.”

“It won’t be accepted by the medical council.”

“Why on earth not?”

“I’ll tell you why,” said Georges. “You have taken over an hour to explain it to me, and during that time you have assumed, quite rightly, that I am fully conversant with all the work that has gone beforehand. You’ve used terms and phrases which I accept because I know what they are, I helped to discover them. You’ve quoted as fact things only you and I know because they are facts that we ourselves established. Even your focal point, the pivot of all your work we had to name ourselves. What would the Medical Council say if they were handed a paper entitled ‘The Rejuvenation Power of the Uter-Parathyroid’! They don’t even know what a uter-parathyroid is.”

Ludwig looked serious for a moment, then he brightened. “We can take them through every phase of our work, we’ll explain every detail as we go along.”

“They’d never allow you the time, Ludwig. If a new theory is presented to them they want to be able to read about it in ten minutes. If they can’t, they say it’s too complicated and not worth wasting time over.”

“Are you sure you know what you’re talking about?” said Ludwig.

“I’m afraid so,” said Georges.

Ludwig frowned. “What do we do then?”

“You carry on until you have every single detail worked out, the rejuvenation of the dead parathyroid especially. Then, and only then, we will put what is theory into practice.”

“On what?” said Ludwig. “You know the uter-parathyroid doesn’t react the same way in animals.”

“Who said anything about animals?” said Georges.

“You mean try it on a person?”

“Of course.”

“But who? Where are we going to find anyone willing to submit to an experiment, in the asylum?”

“Leave it to me, Ludwig. I promise you faithfully that the day you come to me and say you have the entire process clearly defined, I’ll find you a person to submit to your operation.”

“Where are . . . ?” Ludwig started.

“Don’t ask me now, just rely on me to keep my promise,” said Georges.

Such was the understanding between the two men that Ludwig accepted Georges’ promise and immediately started work again, trying to smooth out the uncertainties that still existed in his theory. And now Georges spent a great deal of time in the laboratory with Ludwig. He read all the notes on the experiment, he confirmed various findings that Ludwig had made, until finally he became as conversant with Ludwig’s work as Ludwig was himself. Three weeks later Ludwig perfected a method of re-vitalizing a uter-parathyroid that had been taken from a dead man. This provided another problem in that here to now he had been working with dead glands. The gland that he now had was living, existing on the life that he had put into it, and it didn’t react the way it should have done. He spent a frantic week searching through and revising his notes, and a month after his original outburst he came to Georges again. This time it was unnecessary to explain to Georges, as Georges had been working with him throughout the final phase of his research. Now Ludwig put the question that he had managed to keep at the back of his mind for the past month.

“Where’s the man who’s going to submit to the operation?” he asked.

“I promised you I’d find someone, didn’t I?” said Georges. “I’ve kept my promise.”

Ludwig almost looked over his shoulder to see if anyone was standing behind him. Then he looked at Georges, puzzled.

“Well, who is it?” he asked.

“Me,” said Georges.

Ludwig laughed, then seeing that Georges was not laughing, he stopped.

“You’re mad,” he said.

“Why? Don’t you consider your findings are accurate?”

“I know they’re accurate,” said Ludwig. “So do you.”

“Exactly,” said Georges. “That’s why I’m willing to have the operation.”

“It’s not the operation I’m thinking about,” said Ludwig. “It’s after. It’s the effect on you when we finally publish. You’ll be a freak, people will come and stare at you and say there’s the man who isn’t like us, he’s different.”

“Is it so bad to be different,” said Georges.

“Yes, it is,” said Ludwig. “Society is a well-balanced entity. There are class differences, there are physical differences in that one person has a long nose and blue eyes while another has a short nose and brown eyes, but basically everyone is the same. Black, white, yellow, wherever they come from, whatever their background or calling, they’re the same. There is an allotted life space for all, and this is where you’ll be different. People will look at you and say there’s the man who cheated death. They’ll poke and pry and if they could put you in a cage they’d do that too.”

“I think you’re exaggerating, Ludwig, but you didn’t let me finish what I wanted to say. I have a condition.”

“What is it?”

“That I, and I alone, shall be the judge of when the results of the experiment shall be published.”

Ludwig shook his head.

“Better they are never published than you have to submit to this.”

“Why have you been working like this, Ludwig, devouring all your time and energy down here? What did you hope to achieve?”

“You know that as well as I do,” said Ludwig. “Why do you ask?”

“I ask because now, finally, you have done it. You have succeeded in what we set out to do. I have helped occasionally, but really you could have done as well without me.”

Ludwig shook his head.

“I couldn’t, Georges,” he said.

“That is neither here nor there, what distresses me is that now you have succeeded you’re reluctant to use your discovery. If this is the case, what has been the point all this time? If no one is to benefit, why

did you bother to work at all?"

There was a long silence as Ludwig digested the logic in Georges' argument. Then looked up at Georges.

"What about the ten-year cycle?"

"What about it?"

"It's the one phase I haven't found a solution for."

"You'll have ten years to look," said Georges. "Even if you don't find it, then you can operate again. I don't see that it raises any problem."

"I could do it," said Ludwig thoughtfully. "I could come to wherever you happen to be."

"Why can't I stay here?" said Georges.

"You can for a time," said Ludwig. "But then those around you who are growing old are going to start wondering."

Georges hadn't thought of that. Now before him stretched a vision of having to stay on the move, pulling up his roots every few years. Having to start afresh in a new place with new people. His face clouded for a moment and Ludwig noticed it.

"I urge you to think again, Georges. It is a terrible decision to make. I don't think you will ever be fully conversant with all its aspects until you are experiencing them, then it will be too late."

"I have thought about nothing else for a month, Ludwig. My mind is made up."

Ludwig looked for a long time at the face of his friend, then he nodded his head.

"All right, Georges, if this is what you want," he said.

Georges smiled. "When is it to be?" he asked.

"Whenever you like," said Ludwig. "There's nothing to stop us operating right away."

"To stop you operating," corrected Georges. "I am the patient, remember."

"I think tomorrow," said Ludwig. "I have a rejuvenated uter-parathyroid that I have been working on. It'll save us getting another and submitting it to treatment."

"Whatever you say, Ludwig," said Georges.

"It will be best," said Ludwig. "You will have the week-end to recover and you can appear in the surgery on Monday as though nothing has happened."

Georges stood up. "I'll leave you to prepare what you need," he said. "I'm going out to get drunk."

Ludwig looked at him inquiringly.

"Tonight I say good bye to the man I have known all my life," said

Georges. "Tomorrow Georges Beauchamp will be no more, there will be another bearing his name. *Homo humortalis*."

Ludwig performed the operation at eleven the following morning. He gave Georges a sniff of ether and made a quick incision just below his rib cage. He separated the muscle under the skin and pulled out the small sac that held the uter-parathyroid. He sliced into the sac, cut the gland free and inserted the new gland. A couple of stitches and the gland was connected. He sewed up the sac again, replaced it under the muscle, removed the retractions and closed the incision. It was all so easy, he thought. Could this few minutes' effort really be the answer to solving life's oldest problem? He felt Georges' pulse, it was beating strongly and steadily. He was cleaning up his instruments when Georges groped his way back to consciousness. He found Ludwig bending over him.

"Well?" said Ludwig.

"I feel sick," said Georges.

Ludwig waved this aside with a gesture. "The anaesthetic," he said. "How do you really feel?" Georges struggled up on to one elbow then winced with pain as he felt the pull of the stitches.

"That's the stitches," said Ludwig impatiently. "I want to know how you feel really deep inside you."

"I feel all right," said Georges.

Ludwig straightened up with a smile of satisfaction.

"Is that what you expected?" said Georges.

"Of course it is," said Ludwig.

"Then why were you worried?" He made to swing his feet on to the floor, but Ludwig stopped him.

"You'll split yourself wide open," he said.

Georges looked down at his chest. There was a piece of gauze stuck just below his rib cage. He pulled it aside and saw the small, neat incision an inch and a half long. He looked up at Ludwig. "Is that all the room you needed?" he said.

Ludwig nodded.

"Later, when I get used to it, I'll need less," he said proudly. "Now you stay there and rest for an hour while I tidy up."

Georges lay back and watched Ludwig moving about the laboratory. Then his mind started to wander, carrying him out of himself and allowing him to survey the situation with the detachment of an outsider. Georges Beauchamp, thirty-five years old, handsome, reasonably successful, intelligent had now become unlike other mortals. In fact, if Ludwig's theories were correct, he could no longer

be called mortal at all. Mortal meant subject to death, and he was no longer subject to death but to life. He settled back and allowed the lingering fumes of the anaesthetic to take hold of his mind once more, and he slept.

Two days later Georges had almost forgotten that he had had the operation. He was reminded of it when he caught Ludwig watching him surreptitiously.

“Are you waiting for me to fall down dead?” he asked.

Ludwig smiled. “I don’t know what I’m waiting for,” he said. “I feel after all this work there should be some evidence of what we’ve achieved. It’s difficult to appreciate that I’ve got to wait five or six years before success or failure can be pronounced.”

“I thought failure didn’t enter your calculations,” said Georges.

“It doesn’t,” said Ludwig. “But one still can’t help wondering.”

“At least, the operation doesn’t seem to have had any adverse effect on me. I feel wonderful.”

“You certainly look all right. And remember you’re going to look like this for always. You’re never going to change, until you yourself want to.”

“Why should I want to?”

“For ever is a long time, Georges. Your body and your mind will remain young and healthy, but who can tell about your spirit. There is a zest in life because life is so short. We try to cram into our few short years all the experiences and pleasures we are able. We know that we must die, so we enjoy the time that life allows us. You have broken down the barriers, you have no time limit. In fifty years from now when a normal person is looking on what he has done, you will still be looking forward. Then is the time your spirit may become weary.”

Georges walked over to the mirror and looked at himself.

“It will only become weary if I allow it to do so. Don’t forget I need not hurry from one experience to another, I can take my time, I can savour everything to the last drop.”

He turned to Ludwig.

“It’s rather frightening, Ludwig. It’s all very well looking thirty-five when that is one’s age. But what is it going to be like looking thirty-five fifty years from now? I shall be eighty-five, by all standards an old, old man. Yet I shan’t be old, I shall still be young.”

“Think what you will be able to do, Georges. Think of the knowledge you will be able to accumulate, of the great works you’ll be able to accomplish. I almost envy you.”

“You could be the same, Ludwig. I could do the operation.”

Ludwig shook his head.

“No, Georges. To have done what I set out to do is sufficient for me. I have no desire to live for ever. I will watch you while I grow old . . . now let us drink to what we have accomplished, you and I.”

They fetched champagne and filled their glasses.

“What shall it be?” said Georges.

“For humanity,” said Ludwig.

“For humanity,” echoed Georges.

Ludwig continued to work in the laboratory after the operation, occasionally giving Georges physical check-ups. But Georges remained remarkably healthy. As to his mental state, it was as though by stopping time when he was thirty-five, he had in fact turned time back. He became younger in his outlook and started to enjoy things he had not since he was in his twenties. Ludwig worked on, trying to develop a method whereby it would be unnecessary for Georges to have to submit to the operation every ten years. But success would not come. Finally he called Georges down to the laboratory one day.

“I shall keep working, Georges,” he said. “One day I may find the key, but until that day you will have to continue to have the operation at the end of every ten-year cycle.”

“We expected that,” said Georges.

“I know, but we must be careful. You have read the notes on the experiment and you know as well as I do that when we say ten years, we mean exactly that. Not ten and a half, not nine and a half, but ten years almost to the day. What’s going to happen if I am unable to reach you to perform the operation? I may be ill, I may have an accident.”

“Why can’t you stay with me? Move on when I do?”

“No, Georges. Unlike you, I am still bound by the life span. This is my life, the only one I shall have, I must live it as I see fit. I want to do things, discover things. To do this I must have roots. If I were to stay with you, like you I would have no roots.”

“Then you must make sure you don’t have any accidents and you reach me in time,” said Georges easily.

“I have worked out theoretically a means of allowing you to remain as you are for as much as three or four weeks after the operation time. It requires a fluid which you would have to take if I didn’t arrive in time. It will take me a long time to prepare this fluid, but I shall have it ready when the time comes for you to leave here.”

“Then there’s nothing to worry about,” said Georges.

“There is. To ensure the fluid to do what is required of it, we must accept that it will do things to you that could be extremely

dangerous."

"What sort of things?"

"I'm not sure. It will impregnate your bone structure, this is what I want, but it will also affect your mind. How, and to what extent, I don't know. All I know is that the effect will be temporary."

"As long as that is the case, I don't see that it matters."

"Pray, Georges, that it never becomes necessary for you to have to use the fluid. I shall always try to be with you in good time to perform the operation, only as a last resort turn to the fluid. And then try to remain alone during the period that you are taking it. Is that understood?"

"Perfectly," said Georges.

Ludwig looked at him for a long time.

"I am younger than you are, Georges, yet already I feel older. I feel that it is now necessary for me to look after you and to guide you."

"I never had a father who was younger than I was," said Georges with a smile. Then he put his hand on Ludwig's shoulder. "Don't worry, old friend. I shall be all right."

"I hope so, Georges, I hope so. Now leave me alone, I have work to do."

Five years after the original operation the day came for Georges to leave Vienna. Ludwig handed him a flask of iridescent green fluid which had taken two years to distil, and he warned him once more about taking it only as a last resort. Then the two men embraced with tears in their eyes, and Georges Beauchamp left Vienna for ever.

He went to Rome. Under the name Bonmarche he set up in practice in the fashionable quarter of the city. A French doctor with a Viennese degree was something of a novelty in Rome, and it didn't take long for his surgery to become crowded. He worked hard, and he worked well. His reputation grew steadily, and the more work he did the more proficient he became. He wrote to Ludwig a year after his arrival in Rome.

"This city agrees with me enormously. I like the climate, I like the people and I like the place. What perhaps is more important, the people seem to like me. What is it in human nature that makes people prefer to have a doctor of a different nationality to their own? As a Frenchman I enjoy a success far beyond that which I would were I an Italian."

But it was more than the fact that he was French, and that he was a good doctor. People liked him as a person and he was inundated with social invitations. He was gay, charming and altogether an ideal person to have at a social gathering. His sculpturing, too, opened

many doors. His work in clay and stone had matured in the past few years, and here amid the beauty and grandeur of this ancient capitol of civilization it reached new proportions. There was no shortage of models in Rome, and for a short time he became tired of sculpting beautiful women. He turned his talents to animals and completed some five works of horses. But then he found he missed the companionship of his model, and he reverted to the female figure.

Maria entered his life two years after he came to Rome. He had met her at the opera, and a couple of days later bumped into her at an art gallery. She was a dark-haired, typical Italian beauty. She would probably become fat eventually, but at the moment she was completely beautiful, with a full, voluptuous figure, and a strangely sensuous slumbering quality about her face. She came from a good family and was seen at all the better social functions. Georges took to escorting her, and her family were delighted, her mother even planning for the wedding which would naturally result. Georges enjoyed her company, she had a natural charm and a sharp wit. It was because of this that her more obvious attractions didn't seem important to him, and he made no attempt to make love to her. She accepted this at the beginning, assuming that Georges was either too shy to make the first move, or that he intended asking her to marry him. But when it appeared that he had no intention of asking for her hand, and that he wasn't particularly shy at anything else, she began to get annoyed. She possessed the Italian woman's complex that every man should want to make love to her regardless of whether or not she was prepared to allow him to. In the beginning she had not been prepared to allow him to, and she had watched carefully for his first move, ready to repulse it. But now, when the first move showed no signs of appearing, her attitude changed and she realized that not only did she want it, but that she was prepared to welcome it. She became short tempered in George's company, and he decided that the points that had attracted him to her, namely her charm and wit, were no longer there, so he tried to ease himself out of the association. But this proved more difficult than he had anticipated.

The climax came one evening when they had been to the opera together. Normally on these occasions Georges would drive her home and then come in for a nightcap before returning to his own house. This night he tried to excuse himself from the nightcap and say good night on the doorstep.

“But why aren't you coming in?” she said.

“I have to be up early tomorrow,” he lied. “I have an important case.”

“And I am not important,” she said.

“You are my friend,” he said. “I am a doctor and my patients must come before anything else.”

“That is all I am to you, a friend?” said Maria loudly. Georges looked over his shoulder to where the cab driver was watching, interested.

“We won’t talk about it now,” he said. But she was not to be got rid of as easily as that.

“You cannot throw me aside like an old shoe,” she said dramatically.

“I’m not throwing you aside like anything,” said Georges, wishing she’d keep her voice down. “I’m just tired and I have a long day ahead of me.”

“You are trying to get rid of me,” she said loudly. “You’re tired of me.”

Georges sighed quietly to himself.

“We’ll go indoors and talk about it,” he said.

Watched by the disappointed cab driver, the two of them went into the house.

The servants and the family were all in bed, and Georges helped himself to a drink when they came into the sitting-room. Then holding his drink he turned to Maria who was removing her cloak.

“What’s wrong, Maria?” he said.

She turned on him angrily.

“I’ll tell you what’s wrong,” she said. “You have been escorting me for two months. All my friends have seen us together. Now you want to go away. My friends will think you have grown tired of me.”

“You could tell them you have grown tired of me,” said Georges.

“Ah, so you don’t deny it?”

“No, I don’t,” said Georges, deciding to be frank. “When I first started going out with you, you were fun. I enjoyed your company. Now you are for ever picking arguments and finding fault. You’re not fun any more.”

“And why am I not fun any more?” said Maria.

“I haven’t any idea,” said Georges.

“It’s because of you,” she said. “Look at me, Georges, look closely.”

She moved up to him, holding her head back and gazing into his eyes.

“Am I not beautiful?”

Georges looked at the swell of her breasts where they bulged from the bodice of her dress, at her round shoulders, at her slightly large mouth and her heavy slumberous eyes.

"You're beautiful," he said. "I never thought otherwise."

"Then why don't you make love to me. Am I supposed to be untouchable?"

Georges was caught off guard for a moment. It had never entered his mind to make love to Maria. His sexual appetites were well catered for elsewhere. He said nothing for a moment and then she took his hand and held it to her breast.

"Feel my heart beating," she said. "See, I am alive, I am normal like any other woman, why shouldn't I want to make love."

Georges felt the softness of her breast under his hand, first through the material of the gown, then, as he slid his hand upwards, he felt the warm, vibrant flesh. She was still looking up at him, but her eyes had begun to glaze slightly at the touch of his hand on her breast. Now she suddenly turned round quickly, staying close to him. He reached both hands around her and cupped a breast in each, feeling the weight of them. He moved his hands down from her bare flesh on to her gown, then stepped back and started to undo the fastenings at the back of her gown. She stood still while he unfastened her gown, then he released it, she stepped out of it and turned to face him again. In a moment she was naked, and she turned and walked towards the settee. Georges watched across the room. Her skin was light brown and had the sheen of velvet. Her breasts were large and they moved softly as she walked. Her back was long and straight and her hips were firm without excess flesh.

There was one moment when Georges wondered if he was doing the right thing and wasn't making trouble for himself. Then he pushed this thought to the back of his mind and followed her to the settee.

After that, the affair gained momentum. She had an appetite for sex that was almost abnormal. For a time Georges was content to feed this appetite, then the polygamous feeling, dormant in all men, began to exert its pull, and Georges started to grow weary of Maria. The problem of how to get rid of her was now infinitely more difficult. A chance remark of hers showed that she fully expected him to marry her eventually, but fortunately for him she was content to allow things to remain as they were for the time being. But she claimed more and more of his time so that he had difficulty in getting through his daily list of patients, and found it impossible to spend any time at all in his studio. He tried to get around this by asking Maria to pose for him. But as soon as she removed her clothes there was only one thing she wanted to do, and the statue was never started.

Then a letter from Ludwig gave him the excuse he had been looking for. Georges read the letter carefully.

"A plague has broken out in Southern Egypt," it said. "From what I

can gather it is a form of glandular fever and I am interested in seeing it first hand. I intend to be in Cairo on the twentieth of this month, and from there I shall travel south to the plague spot. While I know that you have your own life to lead, there is no need for me to tell you that I should be delighted if you will join me. It is two and a half years since we saw one another, Georges, and another two and a half before the operation is due. Why not come with me, even if it's only to make sure that I don't come to any harm and will be available to perform the operation."

The letter continued, concerning itself with personal items, and it wasn't until Georges read it the second time that he had the idea.

He had an appointment with Maria that afternoon, ostensibly for a modelling session, but it started in the fashion of all the others. Afterwards, when they were together on the day bed, Georges rolled over and looked at Maria who was staring at the ceiling, lost in a world of her own dreams.

"Maria," he said. "I want you to marry me."

At first she didn't react, then when his words had sunk in she rolled over on one elbow and looked at him, her eyes shining.

"Georges, my darling, I've wanted you to say that for so long."

"I would have asked you earlier, but I couldn't before my plans were finalized."

"I don't care," she said. "You've asked me now, that's all that matters."

"We must make it soon," said Georges. "We have to leave next week."

A shadow flitted across her face.

"Leave? Where are we going?"

"Egypt."

"Egypt, whatever for?"

"I have to go there for my work. There's a plague broken out south of Cairo. I'm needed."

"But you . . . you're not going to take me with you?"

"You'll be my wife, I can hardly leave you here."

"But Georges . . . Egypt . . .!"

"It won't be too bad, my darling. It may be a little primitive as far as living conditions are concerned, but we will have each other, that's all that matters, isn't it?"

Maria looked very worried now.

"Why do you have to go?" she said.

"I just do," he said. "Doctors are needed there, I'm a doctor."

“Doctors are needed here too.”

“There are other doctors here. Where we’ll be going there’s nothing, just the filth and the disease, do you realize we’ll be the only Europeans for hundreds of miles.”

Maria sat up.

“I’ll have to think about it, Georges,” she said.

“But I love you,” said Georges. “I can’t go without you.”

“You must give me time,” she said.

Georges gave her the time she needed. Two days before he was due to leave for Egypt he received a letter from her. Much as she loved him, she had to think about her family and her friends who she would be leaving. And after all, if he had work to do in Egypt he would probably be much better at it if he didn’t have to worry about her. She realized she was breaking his heart, but her heart was broken too. Good bye for ever. And with his broken heart Georges took the train to Naples where he boarded a boat for Cairo.

He met Ludwig in Cairo and the two men had a joyful reunion. Although it was only two and a half years since they had parted they had a vast number of things to discuss. First Ludwig examined Georges thoroughly and agreed that he was in perfect physical condition. He questioned Georges carefully as to whether he ever felt tired, or run down, whether he was ever ill. Finally Georges called a halt.

“Ludwig, I’m not thirty-eight yet. All these questions may mean something when I’m ninety-eight but now they don’t.”

“You’re right,” agreed Ludwig. “But I think of you often, you’re very dear to me, Georges, I worry about you.”

“Then stop worrying and tell me where we’re going.”

Ludwig spread a map on the table top. They were to travel down the Nile for six hundred miles, then overland for two hundred more to an oasis called El Hamid. That was the centre of the plague spot, said Ludwig. Georges asked what Ludwig knew of the plague and Ludwig was forced to admit practically nothing. He had been called in to treat a man in Vienna. The man had been suffering from what at first appeared to be glandular fever. It was only later that the man told Ludwig that he had passed through the El Hamid district a couple of months previously and he had obviously contracted the sickness that was laying waste the population out there. Ludwig had worked for a fortnight and finally developed a toxic fluid which put the man on the road to recovery. Then he made inquiries at the Egyptian Embassy in Vienna and they confirmed reluctantly that there was in fact a plague in and around El Hamid. Ludwig received permission to go, he wrote to Georges, and now here they were together in Cairo.

Two days later they embarked on a flat-bottomed Nile boat. The journey down the Nile was pure enchantment. The two men spent hours sitting on the deck and watching Egypt flow past them on either bank. Occasionally they would go ashore and travel on foot cutting straight across a strip of land which forced the river in a great sweep around it. They would pick up the boat the following day having spent the night under canvas.

Three weeks later they disembarked for the last time and watched while their supplies were loaded on to a camel train. Then came eight days of overland travel with the thermometer hovering in the region of one hundred and ten degrees.

They saw evidence of the sickness long before they reached El Hamid. By the side of the track people had laid down to die, in some cases entire families. The buzzards had kept the desert clean, and they were everywhere. Great birds, bloated with overfeeding having come

from hundreds of miles around to enjoy this magnificent banquet which seemed to go on and on. El Hamid itself was nothing more than a collection of mud huts, scattered haphazardly around the oasis. Normally it was a great meeting place of overland caravans, but now there hung over it the stench of death.

Ludwig and Georges introduced themselves to the headman, a dignified old patriarch who had not succumbed to the sickness. He was overjoyed to hear that the white visitors were medicine men, and he instructed his townspeople to allow them every facility.

A laboratory was quickly set up, and Ludwig started work on the manufacture of the toxic fluid that had had such good results in Vienna. Its main ingredient was found in the bloodstream of the people already suffering from the disease, and Georges set himself the task of covering the neighbouring countryside obtaining the necessary supplies of infected blood. He would set out each day on horseback, accompanied by a village elder. He would return home after dark, completely exhausted by the intolerable heat. His supplies he would hand to the waiting Ludwig, then he would flop down on his bed and sleep until it was time to set out the following day. Then as Ludwig distilled supplies of the toxic fluid Georges would take these with him. He would infect those that he found suffering from the sickness immediately after taking their blood sample. This way a chain was forged, those people being saved by the infection, supplying the ingredients necessary to save another.

Then one night Georges returned to El Hamid to find the headman waiting for him. Ludwig had been ill. The headman had moved him to his own house, and he was there now, asking for Georges. Georges went to him immediately.

Ludwig smiled up at him from his bed.

“I’ll wager you can’t guess what’s wrong with me?” he said.

Georges looked at the visible signs of the glandular sickness and smiled in return.

“Smallpox,” he said.

Ludwig nodded. “You’re probably right,” he said. “But just in case it happens to be this glandular fever, would you give me an injection.”

Ludwig had his injection and three days later he was back in the laboratory.

Two months after arriving at El Hamid, Ludwig judged that their work was finished. The epidemic had been wiped out, and the headman had been given careful instructions as to how to deal with isolated cases which might break out in the future. The night before their departure a great feast was held in their honour. They were garlanded and presented with gifts. Among the offerings were two

beautifully carved caskets, and the headman translated the words that were embossed on the lid of each. Ludwig's was "To the wise one who made the magic cure." On Georges was inscribed the legend, "To the one who worked among the sick yet remained whole." The feast went on until dawn, by which time Ludwig and Georges were hopelessly and helplessly drunk. They were carried to the camel train which was to take them to the point where they were to pick up the boat. Both men left El Hamid without a farewell glance, due to the fact that they were both unconscious.

Three weeks later as they moved slowly up the Nile, Georges noticed one evening that Ludwig was looking at one of the caskets presented to them at El Hamid.

"They're beautiful, aren't they," he said.

"This one's yours," said Ludwig. "It's the inscription that interests me."

"Why, you can't read it."

"Remember what it reads. 'To the one who worked among the sick yet remained whole.' Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"What should it mean?" asked Georges.

"Just what it says. You worked among the sick yet you never contracted the disease. You worked far closer to those infected than I did—you were with them every day, you drew their blood and you injected the toxic, yet you didn't catch it."

"I was lucky," said Georges.

"I think it was more than luck," said Ludwig. "Have you been ill these last two and a half years?"

"No, I haven't," said Georges. "Should I have been?"

"What about your yearly bout of fever." For as long as Georges could remember he caught a feverish cold once a year when autumn turned to winter. It was always a bad cold, appearing with monotonous regularity, and confining him to his bed for two weeks. Now he suddenly realised that he hadn't had it since he left Vienna.

"It must be the Italian climate," he said after a moment.

But Ludwig was getting excited.

"Say our uter-parathyroid operation is the cause," he said, "We know that it halts the normal ageing and decaying process of the body. What if it also wards off sickness as well. It's logical, all sickness is a form of decay. A certain property in the human body becomes weak and is attacked by an outside agent. In your body nothing becomes weak, the outside agents that cause disease don't stand a chance."

Georges thought for a long time. Gradually he turned to Ludwig.

“Let’s try,” he said.

“Try what?”

“Inject me with this glandular sickness, make sure that I’m bound to get it. Then we’ll see what happens. If I do get it we’ve got plenty of the toxic to put me right again. If I don’t . . .” he shrugged.

Ludwig agreed, and later that evening he opened a small vein in Georges’ finger and smeared on some living culture of the glandular disease. If Georges was perfectly normal it was inevitable that the disease should develop within three days. During those three days Ludwig watched over Georges carefully, checking his breathing and his pulse frequently. By the third day he could wait no longer. He took a smear of Georges’ blood and disappeared into the hold where he kept his equipment. Half an hour later he emerged with a smile on his face.

“There’s not a single trace of glandular sickness anywhere. It looks as though the sickness was killed off the moment it entered your blood stream. Not only are you beyond the reach of death, my Georges, but you’re beyond the reach of sickness too.”

The two men parted in Cairo, Ludwig to return to Vienna, and Georges to Rome.

Six months had elapsed since he had left Rome and Maria was now safely married to an Italian Count. Georges noted on the occasions that he met them that while she continued to radiate health and vitality, the Count grew pale and more delicate looking. Georges prescribed him a tonic so that he wouldn’t pass away altogether and leave Maria on the Market again.

Free from Maria, his life in Rome settled back to what it had been before he met her. The work was not arduous, and he had plenty of time for his sculpturing, which he had missed while he was in Egypt. Two years later, almost to the day, Ludwig arrived. A week prior to his arrival, Georges obtained a uter-parathyroid from the local hospital and subjected it to revitalization process. Ludwig remained in Rome for three days and when he left, Dr. Bonmarche disappeared. Callers at his address were greeted by a house boarded and shuttered. The agent for the house could tell them only that Bonmarche had paid his rent and left at the expiration of his five-year tenancy. There was no forwarding address.

Doctor Georges Duval appeared in Zurich. No one could say quite when and how he appeared, it was just that suddenly he was there. He had a large house in the main thoroughfare of the fashionable half of the city, and it was to this house that the patients started coming. News of the young doctor travelled fast. Curiosity formed the basis of the first visit, and after that they returned because he was obviously a

good doctor and he was charming and presentable. The ladies particularly enjoyed his ministrations. He was polite, yet he was firm. If he decided on a course of treatment, he expected it to be adhered to. Any lapse on the part of the patient, and he would tell them politely that he could no longer treat them.

The women were used to their doctor taking orders from them, not the other way around, and this difference appealed to them. Georges had long ago realized that women thought far more of a man who told them what to do, than a man they could tell. They liked to be ruled, however much they denied it. But it wasn't only with the women that Georges had success. The men would accompany their wives to Georges' surgery for the first time, then they would return themselves when they felt in need of a doctor. For Georges was honest with them. If they were ill, he told them so. If they weren't he told them that too. In their experience of doctors, the medical men liked nothing more than to get their hands on to an individual who really had very little wrong with him, and then prescribe a lengthy and expensive course of treatment. Georges was different. His treatments were expensive, but at least when they were prescribed they were necessary, and were designed primarily to cure the patient, and not line his own bank balance. Also he would tell the men exactly what was wrong with their wives, so the men themselves could decide whether or not their wives should continue to visit the doctor. Medicine was becoming fashionable, and women were taking to it, rather as though they took to the latest fashions in clothes. A woman felt out of things if she couldn't tell her friends that she visited her doctor at least twice a week. The majority of the doctors practising at that time looked upon the phase as sent from heaven. For too long they had been consigned to the shadows, now they were being brought out into the light and were being lionized in society. They took a natural advantage of this, and as their lists of clients grew larger, their effectiveness as healers grew smaller. A cured patient was neither a happy patient nor a source of income. So the surgeries of the day were filled with women nursing largely mythical illnesses, and being subjected to equally mythical forms of treatment.

Georges prospered in Zurich. He liked the people and they liked him. He missed Vienna occasionally and often felt tempted to revisit the city. He wrote of this desire to Ludwig once, and received a short note by return.

"Please remember, Georges, that you must never return to Vienna, unless it is at such a time when you have outlived everyone who may have known you. This must apply to every city in which you settle. There is only one way in which this could become acceptable, and that is for us to publish our experiment. But I gave you my promise,

that decision is yours and yours alone. This promise I will keep."

Georges considered what Ludwig had brought up. Should they publish their findings? Then he imagined the results of such a publication. He would never be able to live a normal life again. The things that he loved, privacy, time to work in his studio, the luxuries of his life, all these would be taken from him. He would become, as Ludwig had pointed out originally, a freak. He would be required to travel the world on exhibition like something in a carnival. Another point to be considered, was he being fair to Ludwig by not allowing publication? But Ludwig seemed to have accepted the fact that Georges was not going to tell the world, and he never pressed Georges in his letters.

Ludwig's letters came regularly, and Georges followed his old friend's career with interest. The name Ludwig Weisz had started to mean something, and he was accepted as being the foremost authority on glandular diseases. Occasionally he would publish a paper which he would send to Georges. Georges noticed that while the papers hinted strongly at some of the results that Georges knew were already tried and proven facts, Ludwig never exposed anything that could point to their one great experiment. So Georges decided not to publish, and he wrote to Ludwig accordingly.

"You are already reaping the benefits of your work in other fields," he wrote. "I know that to keep secret the greatest of your discoveries must at times prove more than irksome. But for my sake, allow your work in other fields to provide the outside glory, and let what we two have done together remain our own secret. Allow your satisfaction to be something private, as I do. One day, I know not when, we will publish, and surely the longer we wait, the more startling the results of the publication will be. Remember I am only fifty years old. I still look thirty-five of course, but the difference of fifteen years between age and appearance could be a freak of nature, nothing more. You and I know it is not, but others may, indeed will, doubt our word. When I am sixty-five, or seventy, then will be the time to publish. It is hard to believe that I shall still be as I am twenty years from now, and this is a fact that I constantly have to convince myself of."

Ludwig read the letter with mixed feelings. One part of him wanted the recognition of the world for his work, the other part retreated from this desire. He had thought a great deal on what they had done, and he had begun to doubt very strongly the advisability of publication. After the initial shock that the publication would bring, he could see a situation develop whereby he would be called upon to perform this operation on hundreds of people. Immortality seemed eminently desirable to most people and anyone with the money would clamour at his door. Apart from the fact that he had no desire to

spend the rest of his life performing operations for the transference of the uter-parathyroid, the ramifications were far greater. The balance of nature would be upset, with people living far beyond their normal life-span. Taking it to its logical conclusion, the world would become over-populated, for a large section of the population would not die off to make room for the new. And would the section that remained immortal be the sort of people who would provide general betterment to conditions on Earth. Ludwig doubted it. A price would have to be set on the operation, and this would attract those with money. Monied people, Ludwig had long ago decided, were generally not those who had the traits he considered desirable to populate the earth for all time. Immortality was an incredible vision, the realization of which would affect the mind of the recipient in many ways, none of them particularly desirable.

So he agreed when Georges wrote to him and asked him not to consider publication at that time. The work he had put into the great experiment was not wasted, it had provided the foundations for his present theories on glandular surgery and physics, and these theories were bringing him more and more into the eyes of the medical world. He had started to lecture in the medical centres of Europe, and his lecture tours, combined with his regular work as a surgeon, filled his life.

Three years before the end of the ten year cycle, Georges closed up his house in Zurich and set out on a trip around the world. He wanted to learn something about life. Not the superficial, narrow knowledge to be gained by living out a normal existence, but the wider concept of life. He had begun to feel hemmed in by the barriers he had created in himself and he wanted to find a way to break down these barriers.

He went by train to Marseilles where he boarded a boat sailing to the Far East. It was a cargo vessel with accommodation for two passengers. Georges discovered that he was the only one and was thankful to be left alone. A week after sailing however he stopped taking his meals in the cabin and joined the ship's officers in the saloon. They were a mixed bunch. The Captain, Jacques Petit was a giant man, over six feet tall and wearing a huge unruly black beard. His face was weather beaten and craggy, his eyes light blue and piercing in their regard. From this imposing frame spoke a voice of surprising softness which Georges was never to hear raised in anger. By contrast, the first officer was a small, eager man named Pierre Tournad. He was devoted to his Captain, and the thought that soon he would be eligible for a command himself, filled him with horror. He wanted nothing more than to spend the remainder of his seafaring days serving with Petit. Petit never tired of telling Tournad that at the end of each voyage he would recommend him for his own command,

and the little man would practically weep with frustration as he explained to the Captain that he didn't want the recommendation and should the Company be misguided enough to give him a vessel of his own he would run it aground the first day out of harbour.

Georges became a welcome addition to the officers' table and he soon found himself dragged into arguments and discussions on all topics. For so long had he been accustomed to the drawing-room conversation of Zurich and before that Rome and Vienna, that the discussions at the mess table were something new and invigorating to him. As always, when men gathered, sex formed a large part of their conversation, and it was brought out into the open, dissected, probed, scrupulously examined, and detailed comparisons were thrown back and forth. Pierre Tournad would have had the others believe he was the original Casanova. There was no type of woman he had not seduced, and there was no form of seduction he had not practised. African girls, Malayan, Chinese, Japanese, they had all fallen victim to his magical powers as a lover, and he would lean across the table, his eyes alight with excitement as he described a highly erotic and wildly improbable bedroom scene, while the others listened in respectful silence. Not that they believed him. He just wasn't the type to have done what he so vehemently said he had. It would have needed the constitution of an ox and the ability of a contortionist. But they let him talk because while stories were so obviously fabricated, they were vastly amusing. Occasionally Georges was asked about women. On these occasions he would smile.

"I'm a very ordinary sort of a man," he would say. "I've had my share of women, but anything I have done pales to insignificance besides Pierre's efforts."

Pierre was fascinated that Georges was a doctor and a sculptor. This conjured up visions of undreamed of opportunities. Georges tried to explain that the female form could be viewed in three entirely different ways, but it was doubtful that he made any impression on Pierre's imagination.

"Women are three things to me," Georges said. "First they are my patients. They are sick people in need of my skill as a surgeon. They assume the role of anonymous lumps of flesh, and I am interested only in that portion of their anatomy that requires medical attention. The woman can be fat and fifty or beautiful and eighteen, it makes no difference. I see only the growth to be removed, the incision to be made, the limb to be amputated. Then women are to me the basis of my work as an artist. When you look at a lovely statue of a nude woman you see the beauty of line, you don't conjure up amorous visions of how it would be to make love to the woman of the statue."

“I do,” said Pierre.

“You’re the exception, my friend,” said Georges with a smile. “No, you see only the sweep of line from shoulder to breast, from thigh to knee. It is an aesthetic appreciation, not a sensual one.”

“What about the third category?” said Pierre eagerly.

“Ah,” said Georges. “There we enter a field which has been too well trodden by yourself. I wouldn’t presume to set myself up in competition where I should stand no possible chance of victory.”

“Tell us, anyway,” said Pierre.

“All right. The third side of woman that I see. I see the mother, the sister, the harlot, the prude, the wanton. All these I see in each woman I love.”

“All of them?” said Pierre.

“Surely you see the same?” said Georges.

“Oh, yes, occasionally,” said Pierre quickly. “But making love to a Japanese geisha hardly reminds me of my mother.”

“I didn’t say your own mother,” said Georges. “I said the mother, the whole concept of the word. The fact that the woman is giving something to you and you are accepting it gladly. You make yourself look slightly ridiculous in the process, but the mother regards you with a tolerant affection.”

“I don’t feel ridiculous,” said Pierre.

“If you don’t, Pierre,” said the captain, “you must be the only man in the world who doesn’t.”

“I don’t feel ridiculous,” said Pierre.

“That isn’t the same thing at all,” said Georges. “You don’t feel ridiculous because the mother never allows her child to do so.”

Pierre shook his head.

“It’s all becoming a little complicated for me,” he said. “Why complicate something that is so very simple.”

“If it is simple, then you are truly a man to be envied,” said Georges. “The simplicity of the sexual act with none of its emotional complications.”

“You’re on watch, Mister,” said the captain, bringing the discussion to an abrupt close.

Pierre left the table reluctantly to go up on to the bridge. After he had gone Jacques smiled at Georges.

“You must forgive Pierre his boasting, Monsieur Duval. It’s my idea that words are all he has when it comes to experiences with the fairer sex.”

“The talkers are rarely men of action,” said Georges.

“How is it, Doctor, that you can take such a long break from your work?” asked Jacques. “You are young, I would have thought that you would have been at a time when devotion to your calling would be the most important thing in your life.”

“We are only given one life,” said Georges carefully. “In that short space of time we must accomplish everything that we desire. If we wait, we find it is too late, and we die full of regret.”

“Most men die with one regret or another,” said Jacques.

“That is why I am taking this voyage,” said Georges. “When I die I intend to have no regrets at all. I want to look back on my life and say I have done everything that I ever wanted to do, I have tasted everything and missed nothing.”

“If you can do that you will be a lucky man,” said Jacques, standing up. “Now I must go and see that Pierre isn’t steering us on to some island which is purported to be inhabited by mermaids.”

Georges left the boat at Capetown, arranging to pick it up six weeks later at the same port. The boat had a cargo to carry to Bombay, then was due to return to Capetown before sailing to South America. He remained in Capetown for a week while he organized himself a trip inland. He was warned by the local white population that to travel inland at this time of the year was foolhardy. The rainy season had just finished and tropical diseases were on the march with frightening rapidity. Georges listened to their counsel politely and continued with his plans. He set out for the interior accompanied by a dozen native bearers who, while considering the white man was quite mad, were delighted to accompany him both for the pay and because they considered he was bound to die in the jungle leaving them to divide his supplies among themselves. But Georges proved them wrong. It was incredibly hot, the humid, suffocating heat that always followed the rainy season, and two of the porters collapsed with heat exhaustion five days after setting out from Capetown. Georges left them at a native village and continued to travel inland. By then, word of his coming started to precede him, and it became a common occurrence to enter a glade in the jungle to find a deputation waiting for him.

“The son of a headman is taken with a sickness, Baas, could you attend to him.”

This was translated to him by his head bearer, and they would strike off across the jungle to arrive many hours later at a small kraal containing perhaps two hundred people living as they had lived for the past five thousand years. Georges would do what he could for the sick person, then continue on his way.

Where he was heading for he had no idea. His head porter worried

him incessantly about this.

“We cannot just walk, Baas,” he said on one occasion. “It is necessary that we have somewhere to walk to. Nobody travels in the jungle without reason.” Georges tried to explain that his reason was simply that he wanted to see. He wanted to see the animals, the trees, the plants. He wanted to fill his eyes with their beauty and fill his mind with the magnitude of the earth on which he was destined to live for ever. Apart from his journey to El Hamid, Georges had spent his entire life in the capitals of Europe. Now he wanted to see the marvels that God had created as opposed to those created by Man. And he saw. He looked at the unbroken sweep of the veldt where it edged the jungle, a vision that stretched to the horizon and beyond. He saw the snow-capped peaks of mountains, seemingly so close he could reach out and touch them. He looked at the cool snow while the temperature around him was hovering at one hundred and ten. He saw vegetation run wild, an incredible profusion of green shot with brilliant coloured shrubs that stood out like bright daubs of paint on a backing of dark velvet. And he saw the cruelty of the jungle as she exercised her laws for the controlling of her population. The foliage, eaten by the gentle fawn, the fawn attacked and killed by the lion, the wounded lion dying and rotting into the ground fertilizing the soil and completing the cycle of nature. It was the same all over the world, he thought. This life span was the universal law, and he, Georges Duval, was the only one of God’s creatures who was not subject to this law any longer.

Three weeks after setting out his head porter reminded him it was time to turn back if he wanted to pick up the boat at Capetown. But Georges was intoxicated with the surroundings. He sent a runner back to Capetown with a message for Captain Petit, and he continued inland.

One morning, two days after the messenger had been gone, the camp awoke to find themselves the centre of a circle of motionless figures. There were thirty of them, magnificent looking men, the blackest that Georges had ever seen. They were wearing colourful trappings made from dyed fur, and the colours contrasted strongly with the blue-black sheen of their skins. Georges instructed his head porter to see what they wanted.

“But they are Zambelies,” said the porter, his eyes wide with fright.

“See what they want,” said Georges.

“There is no doubt what they want, Baas,” said the porter with conviction. “They want us. They eat people.”

Georges climbed to his feet.

“Come with me,” he said to the porter. The man followed a couple

of paces behind Georges as he walked up to the edge of the motionless circle.

“Ask which one is their leader,” said Georges.

The porter did as he was told in a trembling voice, and a moment later a man stepped forward from the line. Georges walked over to him and stopped a couple of feet away.

“Ask him what he wants,” he said.

The porter gabbled something in the local tongue and after a moment the man replied. He had a deep sonorous voice that fitted his overall appearance. After a moment the porter turned to Georges.

“It is as I feared, Baas,” he said. “We are on their land, he says, and he is inclined to kill us all now.” Obviously there was more to come, so Georges waited. Finally the porter continued.

“Word has reached them that you possess magical healing powers. Their chief is sick with the devil and the witch doctors have failed to drive the devil out of him. He says if you can do what they cannot, he will let you go. Otherwise he will kill us all.”

Georges looked at the Zambelie leader who was regarding him steadily, then he turned to his porter.

“Load up, then tell him to take us to his chief,” he said.

“But if you cannot drive the devil out?” said the porter.

“Then we shall all die tomorrow instead of right now,” said Georges.

While the porters were loading up, Georges sat and watched the circle of warriors. The leader was talking to his porter, who was waving his arms about as he replied. Finally the porter came over to Georges.

“This man is the chief’s son,” he said. “If his father dies he will be made chief. But this he does not want as he loves his father very much. The witch doctors will be angry that he has asked the Baas to try something that they have failed. So it will be necessary to be on watch for tricks. But if the Baas too fails, then it will not be necessary to be on watch because he will kill us all with his own hands.”

Having delivered himself of this speech the porter moved away to supervise the loading. This took longer than usual as Georges’ porters were in an agony of fear. The motionless circle that surrounded them didn’t improve matters and each man imagined he saw the Zambelies licking their lips in anticipation of the banquet to come. Finally they were ready, and with the Zambelies moving easily on either side, the party filed from the clearing and headed off the trail into the jungle.

It took six hours to reach the Zambelie kraal. It was larger than other kraals Georges had seen, as beffited a tribe who ruled by

strength the surrounding countryside. Their entry into the kraal was a signal for the entire population to stream from their work and form an avenue up to the chief's hut. Georges noticed that the children looked healthy and well fed, and he wondered again whether his porter was accurate when he said these people were cannibals. Then further speculation was driven from his mind as three men came from the chief's hut and stood in the door watching his approach. They were obviously the witch doctors he had been warned about. They were fantastically dressed, with leopard pelts across their shoulders and masks covering the upper portions of their faces. These masks were fashioned from the skulls of animals and each witch doctor seemed to be regarding Georges with two pairs of eyes, their own and the sockets of the skulls. Georges decided that as far as friendliness was concerned there wasn't much to chose between either. As Georges reached them the chief's son stepped forward and started talking to the witch doctor in the centre. At first the man listened carefully, then he started to shake his head. As the chief's son talked louder, so the head shaking grew more vigorous. Georges beckoned behind him for his head porter to interpret. The man sidled up close to Georges and started whispering in his ear.

"The chief's son is telling them that you are a powerful witch doctor and that you are to be allowed to see his father. Their medicine has failed to drive out the devil in the old man."

"Why do they object if they can't cure him?"

"If you cure him where they cannot, they will lose face and be driven from the kraal."

Now the chief's son stopped talking. He pushed one of the witch doctors aside and beckoned for Georges to follow him into the hut. Georges stepped forward and as he did so, one of the witch doctors grabbed a short stabbing spear from the man standing next to him and stepped towards Georges, the spear pulled back for a thrust. The chief's son moved with incredible speed. His arm flashed back and then forward again. The witch doctor who had been moving towards Georges uttered a choked scream and fell forward on his face, blood streaming from his mouth. Buried eight inches in his back was a spear the chief's son had been carrying.

A sound like a giant sigh came from the packed ranks of onlookers, and for a moment every eye was on the man on the ground, watching the dark red stream pour from him. Then the chief's son snapped a couple of words and the two remaining witch doctors stood aside and allowed Georges to move into the hut.

The inside of the hut was dark and the smell abominable. At the far side of the hut was a pile of straw, and on the straw lay the chief.

Three women, his wives, Georges learned later, were crouched at his feet, rocking backwards and forwards slowly, and uttering a low unintelligible chant. Georges moved over to the straw bed and went down on his knees to examine the chief. He was grossly fat, and his age was hard to distinguish. Where his skin might have been wrinkled, it was stretched taut over the mountains of flesh which reared up from the straw. Whatever was wrong with the man, Georges decided, it was going to be difficult to find it under all this fat. The chief regarded him balefully from eyes sunk deep in the layers of fat on his face, but he made no sign as Georges placed a finger on his wrist to take his pulse. The pulse was fast, and his breathing was loud and laboured, but this could have been due to his great weight. There was no fever, Georges decided, pointing to a local infection. This at least was a good sign. He turned to the chief's son who was watching him and signalled that he wanted his porter in the hut. The son disappeared for a moment and returned dragging the porter by his arm.

The porter prostrated himself on the floor of the hut, burying his forehead into the packed earth.

"Get up," said Georges.

The porter looked up warily at Georges, then he straightened up slowly.

"Ask him if he has any pain," said Georges.

The porter said something to the chief and received a short grunt in reply.

"He says he has pain, Baas."

"Where?"

Again the porter spoke to the chief, and this time the reply was longer.

"He says he has a great pain near his manhood," said the porter, "and another pain lower down his leg."

Georges turned to the chief again and started to examine his legs. He found what he was looking for almost immediately. Just above the left knee was a large mass which was not ordinary fat. Georges looked closer and saw that beneath the blue-black sheen of the skin was a faint lightening of colour. He pressed the centre of this point gently with his finger. The chief uttered a howl of pain, and before Georges could say or do anything he was grabbed from behind and thrown back on to the floor. He looked up to see the chief's son standing over him with a knobkerrie about to descend and brain him. He made no move, and after a moment the son lowered the knobkerrie, but when Georges attempted to get up he was pushed down again by a black foot. He looked across at his porter who was watching.

“Tell him I’ve found the devil in his father and the devil became angry when he knew. That is why his father cried out.”

The porter gabbled something to the son who eventually stepped back and allowed Georges to get to his feet.

“Tell him,” said Georges, “that the devil will fight to stay in his father’s body, and this will cause pain to his father. But this will be necessary if I am to drive the devil out.”

Hearing this the chief started to moan from his bed of straw. His son looked at him for a moment, then back at Georges. He spoke to the porter but he didn’t take his eyes from Georges.

“He says you will be allowed to hurt his father for one night only. If the devil has not been driven out by the sun rising tomorrow, then you will be staked out in the centre of the kraal and all the women of the village will take their skinning knives and . . .”

“All right,” said Georges. “I know what he means.”

He walked back to the side of the chief and felt for the swelling in the groin. Even beneath the layers of fat it was discernible to his touch. Again the chief yelled in pain, but this time there were no interruptions. Georges turned to the porter again.

“Tell the son I want a knife, the sharpest knife in the whole village. Then I want a bowl and I want lots of boiled water.”

He watched while the porter translated to the chief’s son, and the son in turn spoke to the three women at the foot of the bed. The women got to their feet and moved silently out of the hut. Georges got to his feet and moved over to the door of the hut to breathe some fresh air. Outside the entire population of the village were still gathered looking towards him, while to one side the two witch doctors were on their knees scraping in the dust and chanting steadily. A dark red stain, already dry, was the only sign that the other witch doctor had ever existed. Georges looked at the sea of black in front of him and remembered the hut at his rear. Here was he, Georges Duval, fashionable doctor from Zurich, Rome and Vienna, hundreds of miles from civilization, about to perform an operation on an old despot. His fee, if he succeeded, was safe passage. If he failed he would probably be skinned alive by the despot’s subjects. The whole situation seemed so ludicrous to him that he had difficulty in suppressing a smile.

Ten minutes later a collection of knives was placed in front of him for him to take his pick. He chose the sharpest, then sent it away to be sharpened even more. When it was returned to him he announced that he was satisfied. Before he entered the hut again his porter sidled up to him.

“Baas, I have watched you work before, and I have seen other white medicine men when they work. While they cure the sickness, they do

not impress the onlooker. I think you should impress these people a great deal if we are to be freed."

"Impress them how?" said Georges.

"It is necessary to call upon the spirits while you are working, that way they know that you are indeed a great medicine man."

The thought of having to chant while he was operating was so ludicrous to Georges that he nearly laughed out loud. Then he recalled the business that usually surrounded the work of witch doctors, the wailing and dancing, the scattering of bones on the ground. He turned to his bearer.

"You will be my assistant," he said. "While I am working you will call on the spirits on my behalf."

"Me, Baas?" said the astonished porter. "But I do not know how to summon spirits. If I did, I too should be a witch doctor."

"I am such a powerful medicine man that they will come whatever you chant. Remember, all the time I am working you will chant."

The porter looked astonished.

"And the spirits will come to our aid?"

"They'd better," said Georges.

But Georges was not worried about the operation. There was a large infection under the chief's skin, probably caused by a foreign body. It was a case of opening the leg and draining the infection, then locating and removing the foreign body that caused it. Georges asked the chief's son for three of his strongest men, then he stationed one man at each arm, and one at each leg of the sick man, the son taking hold of the infected limb. Then when everything was ready Georges took his knife in his right hand and a small bowl in his left. He instructed the porter to commence his chanting, and accompanied by this unearthly wailing the four men took a good hold on their chief and Georges sliced hard and deep into the black flesh. There was an explosion of blood and pus as the pressure inside the leg was released, and the chief who had prepared himself for a scream of agony found himself relaxing back on the straw instead, the pain he had lived with for the past week miraculously gone. The four men felt their chief relax beneath their grip, and they loosened their hold, gazing in fascination at the tide that was flowing from the incision. Using some large leaves dipped in boiling water, Georges sponged off the leg and examined the incision he had made. Then he signalled for the four men to take hold again. The chief was not prepared for what came next, he had thought the devil had been driven out of him for ever. Now as Georges pulled open the wound and started to dig for the foreign body he let out the yell he had expected to earlier. Georges stepped back quickly as the leg he was working on jerked

spasmodically, then after making sure that the son had renewed his grip, he continued his probing. Two minutes later he withdrew the knife, holding on the point a small splinter of metal no bigger than a pin. He tied some leaves tightly around the leg, then he stepped back. His porter, who had forgotten to chant in his fascination of what was going on immediately started again. But Georges stopped him.

“Tell the son that the devil has gone,” he said. “It will be necessary for his father to remain as he is for six sun risings. The leaves must be changed at each rising and setting of the sun, or the devil will return.”

While the porter was doing this Georges walked out into the fresh air again.

He was given a hut close to the chief's and invited to stay at the kraal for as long as he wanted. The son tried to tell him, through the porter, of the advantages in being the witch doctor of the most powerful tribe for hundreds of miles, but Georges explained that his power as a witch doctor was only due to the fact that he moved about all the time, thus being able to call on spirits from all over the world rather than just local ones.

A feast in Georges' honour was held that night, the old chief being carried to the door of his hut so that he could preside. After ascertaining that the meat he was required to eat was animal and not human, Georges began to enjoy himself. He drank a great deal of a colourless, tasteless liquid which was pressed upon him, and it wasn't until he got up to retire to his hut that he realized he was as drunk as a lord.

He managed to find his hut, and staggered in and flopped down on the pile of straw that was his bed. Almost immediately he felt soft hands start to loosen his shirt, and when it was removed, turn to his shoes. It was pitch dark and he was unable to make out anything, but his exploratory hand touched a warm shoulder, slid down over a rearing, hard-tipped breast, on to a flat firm stomach. He thought he heard a faint half-suppressed giggle in the darkness, then further speculation left him as his body was embraced by warm, naked flesh, and his nostrils assailed by a musty, almost animal odour that excited his senses, through the haze of alcohol that clouded his brain.

When he awoke the sun was streaming through the door of his hut, and he was alone. He wondered whether he had been dreaming, but the physical lassitude he felt decided him otherwise. Then he tried to remember what the women of the village had looked like the day before. All he could remember was a sea of black faces, apparently sexless. But his companion of the previous night had certainly not been sexless. He assumed that the woman had been sent to his hut as part of his reward for freeing the chief of the devil that possessed him.

It was a good fee for such a simple operation, he decided, as he got to his feet and walked to the door of the hut. The sun was high and he realized it must be approaching noon. He stood in the door looking at the life of the village moving in front of him. It was a peaceful scene, the women grinding some form of corn husk, the men tanning buffalo hides and the children playing between the huts. Those who saw him standing in the hut door smiled at him and shouted a greeting he did not understand. He smiled and waved back, then he stepped out of the hut to look for his head porter. He walked towards the clearing in front of the chief's hut, the centre of the village both geographically and socially. The clearing was empty except for two men. They were the witch doctors of the previous day. This much Georges gathered by their regalia, which was piled at their feet. The men themselves were completely naked, and each was tied to a stake driven into the ground. As Georges walked across the clearing they followed him with their eyes. But there was no hate or malice in their gaze, only a resigned, disinterested look. Georges wondered vaguely what was to happen to them, then he forgot about it as he saw his head porter approaching him. The man was beaming, his black face almost split in two by the flash of his teeth.

“Good morning, Baas,” he said. “You sleep well?” Georges thought he noted a crafty gleam in the man’s eye, but he chose to ignore it.

“Where can I get a wash?”

“This way, Baas, you follow me.”

He turned and walked off between the huts to the edge of the jungle. A hundred yards into the trees they came to a natural clearing through which flowed a stream. The clearing was close to the source of the stream and the water was surprisingly fresh and clean. Gathered on both sides of the stream were some of the village women, busy with their washing. Their chatter stopped as Georges came into the clearing and they all looked towards him. Georges turned to his porter.

“I can’t wash with all these women watching,” he said. “Can we go further upstream.”

“That will not be necessary,” said the porter. He turned to the watching women and shouted something to them. Immediately they grabbed up their washing with screams of fright, and in a few seconds the clearing was empty.

“What did you say to them?” said Georges.

“I told them that the great pink witch doctor was about to commune with the spirits who helped him.”

Georges stripped off his clothes and sitting in the stream he washed himself thoroughly. He came out of the water and in two minutes the

sun had dried him. He dressed again and walked back to the village, his porter a couple of paces behind him. The chief's son met him on the outskirts and through the porter told him that the chief desired to see him. Georges accompanied him to the evil-smelling hut once more, where the old chief was sitting propped up on his bed of straw. The incredibly fat face creased into a smile as Georges came in. The chief repeated the offer made by his son that Georges remain at the kraal as resident witch doctor, but again Georges used the excuse that it was necessary to travel if he was to stay such a good witch doctor. He unbound the chief's leg and checked that the wound was clean, then he told his porter to tell the chief that he wished to leave the kraal that afternoon. But the chief and his son looked disappointed. The chief said something to the porter who turned to Georges.

"A special celebration has been arranged for tonight," he said. "They ask you to stay and not leave until tomorrow."

Georges was going nowhere, and after a moment he nodded. Both the chief and his son smiled their delight, and the son said something else to the porter.

"The chief's son is going to hunt buffalo this afternoon, you are asked if you would like to accompany him," he said. "Buffalo is very dangerous animal, Baas," he added.

Georges, who had done no hunting, decided that it would be a good way to spend the afternoon, and he agreed.

He returned to his hut, where his porters had left his supplies, and spent the remainder of the morning cleaning his rifle. He had bought the rifle in Capetown, and had not used it yet. He had felt no desire to kill, and his porters had seemed capable of getting all the meat they had needed on their trip. He reassembled the rifle, loaded it and stepped outside the hut. The entire village was stunned by the report of the gun. Never had they heard such a vast noise except when thunder crashed overhead. They rushed to join an excited, curious circle around Georges who was pushing another bullet into the chamber of his rifle. Georges instructed the head porter to set up a target twenty-five feet away, and the porter, full of self importance, cleared a path between the villagers and set up a gourd of water twenty-five feet away from Georges. The villagers crowded in on the path leaving a very narrow channel between them for Georges to sight on the gourd.

Extremely unsure of his capabilities as a marksman, Georges told the porter to move the people further back.

"It does not matter, Baas," said the porter. "If you hit one of them it is of no importance."

"Do as I tell you," said Georges shortly, and he waited while the

porter cleared the villagers from the line of his intended shot. Eventually he raised the rifle to his shoulder and aimed carefully at the gourd. The bullet hit the gourd slightly below centre, and the water exploded from the shattered gourd wetting those close to it. At this display of long distance magic the villagers were stunned. They looked from Georges, to the shattered gourd, then back to Georges again. A sound like a great sigh went through them, and they started to back away from Georges, never taking their eyes from him or from the magic noise stick in his hand.

This is the world we live in, thought Georges. One half of it accepting the rifle as commonplace, the other half seeing it as a magical tool to be used by witch doctors. One half of the world striding ahead into an age of scientific discovery, and an easier way of life, the other half remaining motionless, suspended in time as they had been for two thousand years. Which half were the happier. To these people life was an established existence, there was nothing new towards which to strive, energy was all taken up in the everyday business of staying alive. They had no unfulfilled hopes or dreams, their life was whole and complete, each day to be lived and then forgotten. The other half of the world, Georges' half, lived in the future, wishing their lives away, lives of frustration, thwarted ambition and regrets over opportunities passed. Yet take a man from this village and put him down in Paris or Vienna, he would be unhappy for a time, then he would adapt himself to the new way of life, and would start dreaming the dreams and suffering the disappointments of his fellows. But take a man from the metropolis and set him down in a village like this and he would never settle down. The answer to Georges, was plain. These were the happy people of the world, and would remain that way until the march of civilization trampled them underfoot.

The buffalo hunt started soon after noon. At that time the hunting party filed from the kraal into the jungle. There was the chief's son and Georges leading, followed by ten warriors armed with throwing and stabbing spears. Georges' head porter walked behind Georges, carrying his rifle. The chief's son explained that they were making for a well-known buffalo wallow, which they visited three times a year. To have hunted there more frequently would have kept the buffalo away, so the chief was strict about enforcing this regulation. At other times it was necessary to track the buffalo for miles before getting within spear range. But the penalty for hunting the wallow other than at the prescribed times was death, so there were very few infringements of this rule.

The wallow lay two hours from the kraal and when the party reached a position a half a mile away they checked the wind direction

then started to circle the wallow so as to approach it upwind. The last two hundred yards to the wallow was through buffalo grass, a coarse reed-like plant which grew to a height of ten feet or more. In all Africa, the porter told Georges, there was nothing so dangerous as a wounded buffalo hiding in buffalo grass. If a man was foolish enough to go in after his quarry he could walk right into the animal before seeing it. Not that the buffalo would have let him. They possessed an uncanny perceptive ability in the grass that was named after them, and while the hunter was blind two feet in front of him, the buffalo could sense the direction from which the man was approaching him and could circle if necessary to attack the man from the flank or rear. With all this information ringing in his ears, Georges stepped into the buffalo grass immediately behind the chief's son. The party moved in a single file, and after a moment Georges realized that he was making more noise than the rest of the party put together. Normally this would have caused the other hunters to leave the noisy member of their party behind. But Georges was a great witch doctor, and witch doctors worked in extraordinary ways. Undoubtedly this was the way witch doctors hunted buffalo, making a great deal of noise and tripping over roots even a blind man could see. After three minutes blind progress through the buffalo grass, the chief's son held up his hand and the party stopped, while he moved forward a couple more paces and parted the grass in front of him. Georges moved up to his side and looked out through the gap in the grass.

Twenty yards away was a wallow. A small saucer in the ground which was fed with water from some concealed source. The bottom of the saucer was churned up into a moist, heavy sludge of mud, and in this mud were the buffalo. Georges watched while they moved slowly down the edge of the saucer, and when the mud reached the top of their legs, they rolled over into the mud, emerging a moment later and walking out of the saucer to let the mud dry on their hides into thick scaly patches that flaked away as the animals moved off. There were twenty animals in the wallow, that Georges could see, huge animals with a four-foot spread of horn, and with small, wicked-looking eyes rimmed with flies. They were notoriously bad tempered, his porter had told him, hating every other living creature. They were vicious, and feared nothing, having been known to attack a lion who was misguided enough not to move out of their path. Unlike other animals who killed only for food, the buffalo would kill out of pure bad temper, indeed he was vegetarian, so the necessity of killing for food never arose.

After watching the buffalo for a few minutes, the chief's son asked Georges, through the porter, whether he would like to use his magic thunder stick and kill all twenty buffalo at once. Georges explained

that his magic stick would only kill one buffalo at a time and if he used it now the remainder of the animals would be alarmed and would probably attack the party. He finished by saying that he was a guest and as such the chief's son should have the first kill. There was high ground bordering the far side of the saucer, and Georges said that he and his porter would move round to the high ground there to watch the hunt. This was readily agreed to. The chief's son had been alarmed by the noise Georges had made and witch doctor or not, he doubted that the buffalo would appreciate his guest's magical powers. He would never have said anything himself, but Georges' intention of leaving the business side of the hunt came as a great relief.

One of the warriors was detailed to accompany Georges and the porter, and after ten minutes progress through the buffalo grass, Georges felt the ground rising beneath his feet. A moment later they broke clear of the grass and were looking down into the wallow. The grass on the far side hid the hunting party, but watching the top of the grass as it swayed gently, Georges could get a good idea as to their movements. Then quite suddenly Georges saw the chief's son step from the grass into the clearing. His arm was pulled back, and in a moment he had thrown a spear and ducked quickly into the grass. The spear struck an old bull behind the shoulder penetrating to the shaft. The bull threw back his head and let out a roar of pain and surprise. The other buffalo turned and looked at him, showing no signs of alarm. They watched incuriously as the bull twisted his head round to try and reach the source of the pain. Then perhaps sensing what would happen if his companion smelled the blood pouring from his shoulder, the old bull turned and lumbered off towards the buffalo grass. Georges watched his progress through the grass, following the violent swaying as the bull crashed its way through. He saw in the distance the bull break from the belt of grass and start to lumber into the jungle. Then he saw a warrior dart from the grass behind the wounded animal and slash at his hind legs with the razor edge of a stabbing spear. Hamstrung, the bull's rear legs collapsed, two more warriors appeared and the three men stabbed the bull to death in a moment. All this had been carried out without the other buffalo realizing that anything was happening. The performance was repeated, this time to a cow, and then another bull. But now the scent of blood from the slaughtered animals began to drift back into the wallow, and the others became restless. They knew there was danger threatening but they had no idea from what direction. They were milling about uneasily when a warrior stepped from the grass and threw a spear. But this time he was seen by one of the buffalo. While the recipient of the spear lumbered off to his death, the bull that had seen the spearman lowered his head and charged. He moved with

incredible speed, reaching the warrior before the man could regain the protection of the grass. One needle-sharp horn hooked the man under the armpit, and a toss of the head flipped the man back into the centre of the wallow. In a moment it was over. The wounded man started to get to his knees, and was pushed down again as the buffalo butted him with his forehead. Another buffalo flicked at the man with his horn, ripping his back wide open, so that Georges could see the spine gleaming whitely. Then the animals closed in around the fallen man, butting and stamping as the scent of blood drove them to a frenzy. When they finally drew away, all that was left of the man was a smear in the mud with pieces of bone sticking out at distorted angles. The buffalo, alarmed now, started to move off into the grass, and Georges followed their progress until they broke into the open again at the far side of the grass belt.

They ignored the bodies of their three slaughtered comrades, and in a moment they had disappeared into the jungle.

Georges and the porter climbed down into the wallow and crossed to the grass where they knew the hunting party were waiting. They skirted the shattered remains of the dead hunter, Georges the only one who spared a glance. At the far side of the grass the hunters were already skinning the dead buffalo. As the skin was removed the carcase was quickly cut into sections, then the whole was left under the watchful eyes of the two hunters while the remainder of the party set out towards the village again. There a party of women would be sent back to collect the meat and the hides.

Half an hour out from the village Georges had an opportunity to use his rifle. The party entered a clearing to find themselves being regarded balefully by an old lioness, who was sitting in the shade at the far side of the clearing. For a moment neither side moved, then the chief's son turned to Georges and signalled that he should despatch the lioness with his magic thunder stick. Georges surveyed the distance between himself and the lioness, it was over a hundred and twenty feet, and he doubted his ability as a marksman at such a range. His porter seemed to define his thoughts.

“You have watched them kill, Baas, now they want to see you kill. You will lose face if you do not.”

Georges decided the best thing he could do would be to shorten the range. Accordingly he started to walk towards the lioness, who continued to stare at him, her tail swishing up a small cloud of dust as it moved slowly backwards and forwards. Twenty-five yards away Georges judged that he had a good chance of hitting the lioness, and stopping, he raised the rifle to his shoulder and took careful aim. At the same time the lioness decided that she had had enough of men

pointing sticks at her. She moved from her sitting position into a running attack before Georges realised she wasn't at the end of his rifle any longer. He had time to pull the trigger before the lioness left the ground eight feet in front of him with a spring designed to bowl Georges over. He had a momentary impression of a tawny brown shape passing over his head as he fell to his knees, followed by the sound of snarls and grunts of pain. When he looked behind him the lioness was dead, with the hafts of six spears sticking from her carcase. Whether Georges' bullet had struck her he never knew, although he doubted it strongly. The lioness was tied to a pole and carried by four of the hunters, preceding them into the village. Georges thanked the chief's son and went to his hut to prepare for the evening feast. He looked at his rifle as he put it away, and was reminded once more of the fallacy of civilization. His companions of the hunt had slaughtered three buffalo with their spears, yet had he attempted to use his rifle at the wallow he would have been fortunate if he had killed one. As for the lioness, his rifle had proved completely useless and it was only the spears of his companions that had prevented the lioness turning after her initial charge and tearing him to pieces.

Georges was expecting a repetition of the previous night's feast, so he was surprised when he emerged from his hut later to find the entire village seated in a circle facing inwards. He was escorted to the point in the circle that was intersected by the Chief's hunt and there he took his place on the left of the chief, with the chief's son at his father's right. Georges' porter stood behind Georges both as interpreter and, since the previous day during the operation, as assistant to the great pink witch doctor. There was no food visible and Georges began to wonder what form the celebration was going to take. He was about to ask the porter when a gap appeared in the far side of the circle, and a group of six warriors marched through escorting the two witch doctors.

"I thought you said they'd be banished from the kraal," said Georges to the porter.

"That is the custom, Baas, but in your honour something better has been arranged."

"What?"

The porter was accustomed to the white man's dislike of what they called barbarous practices, so he decided that he'd better warn Georges of what was going to happen. He only had a faint idea himself, but he knew that it would be horrible. Not that he minded personally, a little torture proving an admirable spectator sport, but he didn't want Georges to disgrace himself in any way or offend their

hosts.

“These men are to be tortured in your honour, Baas. It will be a long death that they suffer. I warn you, because to try and prevent it will offend the Zambelie. It will cause them to lose face in your eyes, and great witch doctor that you undoubtedly are, they could not allow you to leave the kraal if they thought you had caused them to lose face. If you don’t want to watch, close your eyes, but be careful that they do not see this or it will . . .”

“They’ll lose face,” interrupted Georges. The porter nodded.

Two stakes were driven into the ground in the centre of the circle and fifteen feet away from the front of the chief’s hut. One man was tied to each stake, his arms pressed backwards around the stake and tied at the back. Then the chief’s son stepped forward and addressed the two men, while the porter translated for Georges.

“He is telling them they are false witch doctors and that as such they should be banished from the kraal. But as they were exposed by such a powerful man as yourself they are going to be fortunate and will die in the prescribed fashion.”

Whatever the prescribed fashion was, it obviously terrified the two ex-witch doctors. Where before they had been passively waiting their fate, now they started to cry out and strain at their bonds. Then two old women stepped into the centre of the circle and moved up to the two men. They each carried skinning knives, and they were obviously delighted and honoured at the part they were due to take in the forthcoming ceremony. They stood waiting for the signal to start. It came eventually, as the chief’s son stepped back to his place beside his father and the Chief clapped his hands loudly. The women each approached one of the men and using the knife they carried, they did something to the men’s chests and abdomens. What it was Georges couldn’t see, and the noise from the two prisoners was indicative more of fright than of pain. Then the women stood back and Georges could see a faint tracing of blood on the men’s chests between the nipples, stretching down to below the navel. As the women stepped aside their place was taken by two young men. The men stepped close to the two prisoners, fumbled for a moment at the prisoners’ breasts, then they stepped back and pulled hard. There was an unholy ripping sound like tearing cloth and each prisoner screamed aloud his agony. From between their breasts down to their lower abdomen a strip of flesh six inches wide had been ripped away, and was now being carried around the circle of onlookers by the men who had done the ripping. The strip of flesh was deep and had left the ribs of the unfortunate men gleaming whitely. They writhed at their bonds, while indescribable sounds of pain dribbled from their lips. After walking round the circle

of onlookers the two men deposited the strips of flesh at the feet of the Chief. Then they moved back to the stakes where the two old women were already at work. This time the flesh was ripped to the left of the original area and the same little ceremony followed, with the raw flesh being laid with the other at the feet of the Chief. Just before the third strip was torn from the still conscious men, Georges turned to his porter.

“Fetch my rifle,” he said.

“But, Baas, what . . .” the porter started to protest.

“Do as I tell you,” snapped Georges, then he turned as two screams announced the continuation of the torture. A minute later his rifle was handed to him.

“Tell the Chief I want to use my fire stick on these two men,” he said to the porter.

The porter hesitated for a moment, then seeing the look in Georges' eyes, he did as he was told. The chief said something in return and the porter turned back to Georges.

“The Chief says it is necessary for these men to suffer pain, will your fire stick do that?”

“Tell him,” said Georges “That the fire stick will take them out of this world but will deliver them to my spirits who will make them suffer pain greater than the Chief ever dreamed of.” The porter turned back to the Chief and spoke for a few moments, and the Chief started to smile. Then he called off the women who were preparing for another strip of flesh to be torn away and signalled for Georges to move into the centre of the circle. Georges stuffed a bullet into the rifle and took up a stance three feet away from one of the pain racked lumps of flesh and nerves that had been men. He raised the rifle, sighted at a spot between the man's eyes and pulled the trigger. He repeated the process quickly, practically removing the top of the second man's head. But when he returned to his place he knew he had spared the men many hours of unbearable suffering. His explanation as to the ultimate fate of the two men was passed on to the disappointed villagers, and the feast started. It was a repeat of the previous night, although this time Georges did not drink so much of the liquor that had dulled his senses the night before. Much later he excused himself and returned to his hut watched with ill-concealed slyness by those who knew what was waiting for him.

He entered the darkness of the hut and moved over to his bed. He sat down, and as before he felt soft hands reach for his shirt. Then he struck a light. Kneeling before him was one of the village girls. Georges put her age at about fourteen although her body was fully developed. She sat back on her heels and looked at Georges blinking

in the flare of light which Georges was holding high. Her eyes were widely spaced, and her features had not formed into the full negroid cast that they would in a couple of years. At least, this is what Georges told himself as he extinguished the light, and reached out towards her. His hands felt the warm softness of her shoulders, and slid down to cup her breasts. As she moved in closer to him his nostrils were again assailed by the musty odour that had excited him so much the night before.

The following morning when Georges awoke he was alone. He called for the head porter immediately and said that he wanted to leave the kraal as early as possible. While the porter was supervising the loading of the supplies Georges went to see the Chief for the last time. Without the porter they could not converse, but the Chief indicated that his son and a dozen warriors would accompany Georges' party to the edge of the Zambelie territory.

An hour later, watched by the entire village, Georges' party filed off into the jungle. Two days later the chief's son and his men said good-bye and watched Georges' party move away to the South-East. Now unaccountably Georges wished to get out of the jungle. He had been away from civilization for over a month, and the barbarism he had seen had begun to fray at his nerves. Each man to his own environment he decided, the civilized man cannot live in the jungle and be happy. Apart from the creature comforts of civilization, which were lacking in the jungle, here in Africa the mind could not encompass the world that bounded it on all sides. Civilized people constructed a world of their own within whose bounds they could live comfortably. But out here the world was constructed by God. His hand could be seen in the limitless expanse of the veldt, in the magnificent rise of the far off peaks, in the infinite blue dome of the sky. It was too vast for comprehension, and over all was the brooding feeling of an omnipotence that was too vast for human comprehension.

They made good time on the return journey and at Cape Town Georges paid off his porters and presented the head porter with his rifle. The head porter expressed the desire to return to the Zambelie kraal as witch doctor, but Georges reminded him of the fate of his predecessors, and the man changed his mind.

Captain Petit's boat was still in Cape Town and Georges boarded it gratefully, settling down into his old cabin once more.

The first night out at dinner he told Captain Petit and Pierre Tournad of some of his experiences, and of the sudden desire to get away from the jungle and back to civilization.

"I have known that feeling myself," said Petit. "After a long voyage I have travelled to my home in Avignon, and for a short time

everything is as it should be. Then one morning I awake, and there is nothing more important than I get back to sea. Man is put on earth to live a life, and he adapts himself to the mode and location of his life throughout his formative years. Once those years have gone, he has established himself in the existence that is to be his until he dies. Take him away from this and he will not be content. At the time he may confess to hating his life, his home, his friends and he will say that anything is preferable to what he has now. But away from this and he will die."

Georges agreed with Petit, and he began to wonder why he had come on a world cruise. Ostensibly his excuse had been to select a location for his next ten year cycle, but he knew it went deeper than this. He could see stretching out before him time without end, and the thought terrified him at times. He had vaguely hoped that this journey would open his eyes to a new mode of existence, where at least the monotony of what was to come could be relieved. But he realised that however bored he became, he would never be able to cut the cord that bound him to his environment.

"The gateway to India," said Petit on the bridge. "Bombay. Enjoy the view from here, when you get near the stink will kill you."

Georges stayed on the bridge while the boat moved up the great waterway that was Bombay harbour. It was a magnificent sight, studded with mountainous islands. On the left the stately buildings of Bombay island, and on the right the palm fringed shore of the mainland rising gradually to the distant mountain peaks. On both sides the impression was that of a giant canvas, daubed with colour and crowned with the deep blue dome of the sky. It wasn't until the boat moved closer to the shore that individual buildings made themselves known, standing out from the backcloth and giving depth to the scene. Petit was right about the smell. As the boat tied up and the gangplank was lowered Georges smelled India for the first time. It was a mixture of decay, sweet spices, sweating humanity, rotting garbage and a hundred others that defied classification. The overall result was almost over-powering at first, then after a few minutes the nostrils adjusted themselves and one was no longer conscious that there was a smell.

Georges stayed on board all afternoon, and watched the Indian harbour workers swarm all over the vessel, unloading her cargo. It was here that he saw for the first time the rigid ruling of the Indian caste system. The harbour workers were labourers, dirty for the most part, and to Georges' eyes, surely the lowest section of the social scale. But then he noticed another group of men whose job seemed to be nothing more than following the harbour workers around, sweeping up after them. These were the Untouchables, Petit told him. The

lowest caste in Indian society. They were born to their caste and could never rise above it. Their children and their grandchildren would be Untouchables after them. But they seemed to accept their role in society with the stoicism that Georges later learned was the national heritage of the Indian. The women that he saw moving around on the harbour were all heavily veiled and all doing manual work. They appeared, as did the men, indescribably filthy. Georges commented on this to Petit.

“Cleanliness is a matter of comparison,” said the Captain. “To these people, it is us who are dirty. We have dirty habits, we blow our noses and then put our hankerchiefs into our pockets. We eat with knives and forks which have been in other peoples mouths. We wash twice or three times a day. To them all these things are signs of the general uncleanliness of the white man. They eat from leaves with their fingers. The leaves are thrown away afterwards. They wash six or seven times a day. Because they dress afterwards in the same filthy rags it doesn’t detract from the fact that bodily they are clean. Cleanliness is almost a religious necessity. They chew betel nut, it freshens the breath, it also stains their teeth red, but who are we to say that teeth must be white to be clean.”

Petit asked Georges what his plans were now they had reached Bombay. The vessel was due to load a cargo and then return to Cape Town. Georges told Petit that he wanted to see something of India now that he was here. The philosophy of the mystics fascinated him and he wanted to learn more of it and try and adapt it to his own way of life.

He spent one evening in the company of Captain Petit and Pierre Tournad, touring the bazaars and brothels of the Bombay waterfront. Here Pierre proved that all his talk of success with women was not idle boasting. Time and time again he would disappear through a bead curtain to reappear twenty minutes later hitching up his trousers with a satisfied smirk on his face. Georges and Petit tried to keep count of the mate’s trips, but they gave up after the sixth time.

“He must be a superman,” said Georges.

“If he’s not, he’s investing a great deal of money to prove to us that he is,” said Petit.

It was after midnight that they found themselves in a small cellar, stiff with smoke and noisy with the voices of the customers who crowded the place to capacity. Again Pierre disappeared, but this time to come back a few minutes later with an excited gleam in his eye.

“I’ve arranged a show,” he said. “Come on.” Georges and Petit followed him through a bead curtain, along a short passage, and into a room at the end. There Pierre fussed over them while they sat down

facing a raised platform at the end of the room. When they were ready Pierre clapped his hands together like some oriental potentate and the entertainment began. It was wildly erotic, and to Georges and Petit, hilariously funny. The actors were a tired old couple who looked about fifty, and they went through their programme of eroticism with complete detachment that made the entire proceedings ludicrous. But Pierre was in his element. He watched with an absorbed fascination, occasionally taking his eyes off the stage to see how his companions were reacting. The finale came with a parody of the sex act which left Georges and Petit weak with laughter. As the actors left the stage, Pierre turned to his companions, his eyes gleaming with excitement.

“What about that?” he said. “Have you ever seen anything quite like it before?”

Georges and Petit admitted quite truthfully that they hadn’t, and well pleased with his effort Pierre led them out into the street again. Petit now said that he wished to return to the boat, and Georges said that he would accompany him. Pierre was disappointed at first, then an interesting sign hanging outside a café fifty yards up the street, drew his attention, and as Georges and Petit hailed a passing tonga, Pierre was already half way there.

Georges and Petit went straight to their cabins and within ten minutes Georges was asleep. It seemed like moments later that he was awakened by Petit shaking him.

“It’s six o’clock,” said the Captain. “There’s a man here from the police, he wants me to go with him to identify Pierre.”

Georges sat up quickly.

“Is there anything wrong with him?”

“I don’t think so, but they want it confirmed that he’s mate on this vessel. He’s lost all his papers and they don’t believe him.”

“Give me two minutes,” said Georges throwing back the bedclothes.

At six in the morning the city was already wide awake, the streets packed with humanity. The police station was a plain white stone building on the main thoroughfare. Georges and Petit were shown into the office of an Inspector. He was a young Indian who spoke perfect French, and he was extremely polite. He apologized for dragging them out at this early hour, but it was a matter of some importance.

“Last night I received a complaint from one of my men that there was a European causing trouble in the brothel area. It seems this European was visiting various brothels where he selected the best woman in the establishment.”

Georges and Petit looked at one another.

“What’s wrong with that,” asked Petit.

“Nothing,” said the Inspector. “But it seems when he . . . when he retired with the woman of his choice he refused to . . . well, refused to act in the accustomed manner.”

“I didn’t think there was an accustomed manner in these places,” said Petit.

“You misunderstand me,” said the Inspector. “I agree with you that these women cater for all tastes. But they take a pride in their profession and they do not like to be insulted.”

“Insulted in what way?” asked Petit.

“Simply that this European expressed no physical desire whatsoever. He has a small knowledge of the local dialect, and he spent his time telling the various women that what they were doing was sinful and that they should immediately leave the brothel where they worked and become respectable women. You will understand that these women take a great pride in their work, and naturally they complained to their superior. She called the police and the rest you know . . .”

“You mean he didn’t . . . well he didn’t do what he had paid for,” said Petit.

“He did not. When my men arrived at the brothel that had called them he had moved on. Four times they missed him. Then he was attacked by one of the women’s protectors, he lost all his papers, and if my men hadn’t arrived he would very likely have lost his life as well.”

The Inspector left them alone while he went to fetch Pierre.

“What possible explanation is there?” asked Petit.

“I think the explanation is simple,” said Georges. “Pierre is incapable of performing the sexual act, possibly due to a glandular deficiency. This sets him apart from his fellows. Some men cannot tolerate the fact that they are different so he creates an imaginary world in which he is the great lover. This is all very well at sea, where the physical is not available to prove him a liar. At times like this I believe he even convinces himself that what he is saying is true, even if he doesn’t he at leasts puts himself on a level with his companions. But ashore, he is no longer their equal and talking is no substitute for the real thing. So he strives to make himself equal again, not by performing the sexual act himself but by trying to deprive his fellows of the opportunity for them to do what he cannot. He reasons that if there were no prostitutes, then his companions would be unable to indulge themselves and would therefore be as he is.”

“It’s a complicated theory, Doctor,” said Petit.

“Indeed it is, but I should be surprised if it’s wrong.”

“What do we say to Pierre?”

“Nothing. No doubt he will have a wildly erotic story to justify his present predicament. Accept this story, tell him he’s a wild fellow, and leave it at that.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to let him know that I know the truth?”

“I think it would kill him. Not physically of course, but mentally. He would retire into himself and build a wall of protection in his mind. He would become morose and a deathly companion, and probably quite useless as a ship’s officer. Allow him his phantasy and let him remain a man.”

Pierre appeared a moment later with the Inspector. He looked dishevelled and worried. His first words were to Petit.

“Did the Inspector tell you about the trouble?” he asked carefully.

“He said you created a rumpus in the brothel area that will be remembered for a long time to come. You really must try to behave yourself Pierre, you’ll be making the word European synonymous with ram.”

Pierre’s face lit up.

“I tell you Captain. I did things last night that astounded even me. There was this Burmese girl, she . . .”

“Later Pierre,” said Petit. “You have the next ten voyages to tell me what happened.”

“Of course Captain,” said Pierre happily. “It will probably take that amount of time too.”

Later that day Georges said good-bye to Petit and Pierre Tournad for the last time. His final glimpse of them was from the rear of the tonga carrying him away from the harbour. They were both leaning on the bridge rail watching his departure. Then Georges saw a long file of women cross the line of vision, and Pierre turned to the Captain and started talking to him excitedly, waving his arms about so that Georges could almost imagine every word that was being said. He thought about Pierre as he was transported through the teeming city. The little man with the big dream. But was his dream so big, he desired to be normal, and this desire affected his entire life. Georges thought how he had forsaken normality for the path he now trod, while Pierre would have sold his soul for the normality that Georges had chosen to give up. Pierre, a civilized man with the apparent gifts of civilization, yet lacking something that even the Zambelie natives possessed. Where had the distribution of nature’s gifts gone wrong, was there no established pattern that could be pinned down and pointed to as the foundation of life.

He found a caravan of merchants travelling to Agra. He originally planned to travel alone, but he was warned that the roads of India were dangerous for travellers. The cult of the Thuggee was active, and these bands of stranglers would ambush parties of less than ten and murder them quickly and silently. So wherever possible parties travelled together and found safety in numbers. As was customary each party had its Holy Man, and Georges was fortunate in discovering that the Holy Man who was to accompany them had a smattering of French.

“I visited Europe once,” he said.

“Were you impressed?” said Georges.

“Impressed with what?”

“With the great buildings, the cities, the scientific discoveries,” said Georges.

The Holy Man smiled.

“These are the work of man, my son,” he said. “One should not allow oneself to become in awe of what man has done, but only what God accomplishes.”

“You speak of God,” said Georges. “Yet you don’t believe in him.”

“What is God,” said the Holy Man. “He is different to all men. The Christian, the Hindu, the Mohammedan, the Buddhist, all worship a different form of what is the same. He is not a person, living or dead, he is not a golden statue, he is a state of mind. God is to every man what every man wants him to be.”

“Then how does this bear out what you were saying earlier, that one should only be in awe of what God accomplishes, and not what man does. According to your argument God and man are one and the same.”

“Man does not build a great building or work in science for the better Glory of God,” said the Holy Man. “But for the better glory of himself. The work of God is seen in the laugh of a child, the budding of a flower. And when a man recognizes this as the creation of God, then he is a Godly man. I am not belittling the marvels of European civilization which you assumed would impress me, they are truly marvels of man’s ingenuity, but only God impresses me.”

“Would nothing that man does impress you?”

The Holy Man shook his head.

“Nothing, my son.”

Georges was tempted to tell the Holy Man of himself, then he realized that far from impressing him it would probably have the opposite effect and be considered as a work of sacrilege. The journey to Agra took many weeks. There was no urgency in the movement of

the caravan, and again Georges found himself beginning to fret with impatience. It was the civilized man's habit of living in the future that caused this. He had made up his mind to visit Agra, and now he was unable to enjoy the time that was spent before he achieved his object. Having sighted on his objective he was impatient to achieve it. He lacked the Indian's capacity to enjoy each moment as it presented itself with no thought for the future. The Holy Man put into words what he felt.

"Life is given to you to live. Live it all, each moment without concern for the morrow. The morrow may never come and then the time spent in worry has been wasted."

It was the philosophy that Georges was searching for, the one that would enable him to live with himself, yet he could not embrace it yet. He still fretted at delays, because they put off the time when he would achieve the artificial objective he had set himself. He realized it was artificial, he had no plans after Agra, there was no one waiting there for him, so why was there this urgency to arrive. But try as he could he was unable to relegate the thing to its proper position in relation to the philosophy he wished to acquire.

Eventually he left the caravan and moved on alone. Now he found that he was prepared to delay his journey without worrying. He realized then that it was the delays forced upon him by others which irritated him. Alone, he was his own master and gradually he found himself absorbing the philosophy for which he had been searching. The impatience left him and he discovered a new satisfaction in living. He no longer regarded objects in relation to others. Each thing became a separate entity to be studied or dismissed. The stream was not a means of irrigation for the surrounding fields, neither was it a general part of the surrounding countryside. It was a separate thing, entirely on its own and its effectiveness as an irrigation source was secondary to its own existence. The child by the side of the road was not a part of its parent, but an individual with an existence of its own. The flower, was not part of the shrub that bore it, neither was the shrub part of the flower. So it was with time, the moments that passed began to lose their relationship with their companions and became separate sections of time, each to be experienced for itself before passing on. It was in this state that Georges discovered one morning the caravan had caught him up. The Holy Man smiled at him when they met later.

"You who were all impatience," he said. "Now you have become slower than we are."

"I have learned myself, what you attempted to tell me," said Georges.

"It is something that one cannot be taught," said the Holy Man. "If a

man does learn this himself he must give up searching for instruction. You are fortunate my son, your people seldom attain the happy state, which to my people is part of their inheritance. Yet you are unfortunate too. You will be returning to your country armed with the philosophy of the East. How will this philosophy fit in to the life that you are forced to lead?"

"My life is my own," said Georges. "I live it as I please."

"Yet every man is subject to his neighbours' way of life, unless he chooses to be a hermit. Here in India the philosophy you have acquired is generally accepted, therefore there is no friction. Where you are going you will be the exception, the odd man. You will find it difficult. Your friends will consider you are selfish, and they may shun your company."

"I have no friends that matter," said Georges. "Except one, and he will never shun me."

"A man who has one true friend in life can count himself lucky," said the Holy Man.

"The others are of no importance," said Georges. "If they choose to count me as a friend they are welcome, but I shall not suffer if they don't."

"With this philosophy," said the Holy Man. "you can be happy for the remainder of your life."

Georges was happy. He felt his search was over. He stayed with the caravan until it reached Agra. There he said good-bye to the Holy Man and took lodgings in the ancient fortress city. He visited the Taj Mahal, that incredibly beautiful edifice built as a memorial to his wife by Shah Jehan, where he now rested beside her. He visited the cell in the old Red fort where Shah Jehan had been imprisoned by his son. High in the wall of the cell was a small piece of mirrored glass set at an angle so that the Taj Mahal was visible through it from the floor of the cell. The Shah had lived out his days of captivity staring at the tomb of his beloved through the small mirror. Had he the philosophy of the Holy Man, thought Georges, or had he spent his days dreading the future or regretting the past.

Then one day he realized with a shock that only a year remained before he was due for the next operation. So immersed had he become in the present, that the future had become unimportant. Now suddenly the future assumed vast proportions. He packed up quickly and travelled overland to Karachi, where he boarded a boat bound for Tor on the Sinai peninsula, at the northern tip of the Red sea. There he took a smaller vessel which carried him north-west up the Gulf of Suez to the little town of Suez. Already this town was beginning to grow. A Frenchman by the name of de Lesseps was constructing a

canal which was intended to connect the Red Sea to the Mediterranean, and while many considered it a wild dream, there were some who agreed that the idea was not only practical, but would turn Suez and Port Said into the gateway to the East. Georges travelled overland along the canal workings, and in spite of his haste he stopped for a few days to watch the construction work. Although a fair amount of machinery had been imported and transported inland with incredible difficulty, the majority of the work was being done by Egyptian labourers. The pyramids must have been built in such a manner, thought Georges. Thousands of ant like figures moving in unison accomplishing something which would perhaps eventually rival the pyramids as an example of what concerted human endeavour could do. He was fortunate enough to meet Ferdinand de Lesseps, a quiet, soft spoken man with a vision. It was through this meeting that Georges finally understood the essential difference between the civilization he was returning to, and the philosophy he had acquired. Without men like de Lesseps there would have been no civilization. It was his kind, the dreamers and the visionaries who set the West above the East in material values. The philosophy of the Holy Man did not allow for progress, as progress had to be planned. Without a care for the future there could be no progress. So while nursing the philosophy to himself, Georges knew that because of it he would accomplish nothing lasting in the world he was returning to. This did not disturb him unduly, he was different from other men, and different standards had to be applied to govern his way of life. Let the others, the de Lesseps of the world, plan and build, Georges would remain on the side and watch.

He boarded a boat at Port Said, bound for Naples. He had decided that this was to be his next home after he left Zurich. He wrote to Ludwig that he would be in Zurich a month before the date of the operation, then he set about finding himself a new home. Having arranged a house that he could come to, he caught the train to Zurich, spending one night in Rome en route. He was careful to keep away from the fashionable quarter of the city. He didn't want his acquaintances of ten years ago to see him. A week later, almost three years after he had set out, Georges returned to Zurich. He did not announce his return, choosing to remain alone until the time came for Ludwig to arrive. He engaged no servants, and he moved up to the studio to live. Here was the one thing he had missed during his travels, his sculpture. He started work immediately, working from memory and from the few sketches he had made on his trip. A head of the Zambelie Chief's son was first, then a head of the Holy Man.

He made one trip into the city centre, and that was to obtain a uter-parathyroid for the forthcoming operation. Ten crowns slipped into

the hand of the mortuary attendant, and he had what he wanted. He subjected it to the necessary revitalization treatment, and there was nothing more left, but to wait for Ludwig.

In Vienna, Ludwig was proving a difficult patient. He had collapsed while he was lecturing at the Sorbonne in Paris, and had been returned to Vienna to convalesce. His doctors insisted that he remain in bed until they told him otherwise, and when he mentioned that he would have to go to Zurich, they flatly refused to allow it. He knew that Georges was waiting for him, and he knew what would happen if he failed to arrive. So he left his bed one day and crept out of the house. He was about to board the train for Zurich when he collapsed again and was taken home unconscious. It was two weeks before he thought coherently again, and another week before he was fit enough to travel.

Meanwhile Georges had been driven practically out of his mind. He could not risk going to Vienna in case he missed Ludwig, and he wasn't even sure that his friend was there anyway. So all he could do was remain in his studio and wait. When Ludwig did not arrive on time he started to take the fluid that had been prepared for this eventuality. It was the first time he had been forced to use it, and the effect it had on him was terrifying. He took the first dose on time and felt no ill-effects. Then as the time approached for the second dose, he saw for the first time the visible evidence of what he was doing. He saw his own skull peering at him from the mirror, and he saw the skeletal spiders that were his hands. It subsided as soon as he took the fluid, but it left him shaking with fright.

He started by visiting the station each time there was a train due in from Vienna, but then he grew frightened to be away from the house in case his timing was wrong and he was caught without being able to reach the precious fluid.

When Ludwig arrived, on the point of collapse once more from the strain of the long train journey, he found Georges unshaven and haggard, hiding in the studio at the top of the house. He performed the operation that same evening to obviate the necessity of Georges having to take more of the fluid. Later, as Georges was coming out of the anaesthetic, he grasped Ludwig's hand fiercely.

"It seems that all reason goes," he said. "For a moment I am like a madman and there is nothing I wouldn't do. And there is the terrible appearance, the impregnation of the bone structure." He shuddered as he recalled it.

"Don't be late again, Ludwig, never be late again."

The following day it seemed that he had forgotten all about it. Ludwig watched him move around the studio whistling quietly to

himself as he checked the crates that contained the statues he was moving.

“Where do you send all these things?” said Ludwig.

“I’ve a place in Paris,” said Georges. “One day I shall have an exhibition of all my works. People will marvel that a man of thirty-five could have accomplished so much.”

“Is that what you want, people to marvel?”

“I would like my work as an artist to be appreciated, it’s perfectly natural.”

“What is more important to you, the fact that you are an artist or a doctor?”

“The fact that I am a man is the most important. I have learned something during the past two years that most people learn as they are about to die. It is the ability to live for the moment, with no hopes for the future and no regrets for the past. This is the only way that I will be able to live the life you have given me.”

“If indeed you have learned that you are a fortunate man, Georges.”

“I have seen primitive people who have not progressed during the past two thousand years. I have seen wise men of India who practise the same philosophy. These are the happy people of this earth, Ludwig, not us with our constant striving towards artificial objectives.”

“You’re probably right, but without this striving you would never be as you are today.”

“I accept that, just as I accept the fact that one half of the world will always behave in this manner. That half will move on towards great and wonderful things. Then one day they will commit some act using the very discoveries that have allowed them to progress, and they will revert back parallel to the other half. Still they won’t be happy because they have the seeds of discontent sown into their character, and the cycle will commence again.”

“The story of mankind,” said Ludwig with a smile.

“Which I will be able to watch,” said Georges. “It’s a fascinating thought that I will be able to stand by and watch my prophecies take place.”

“You’re looking into the future, Georges,” said Ludwig. “You just told me that you gave the future no thought.”

“I don’t,” said Georges. “But occasionally I revert to type and I speculate.”

“Where are you going now?”

“Naples. I’ve arranged everything including my new identity.”

“Your name?”

“Georges Beauville.”

“All right, Doctor Georges Beauville. Success and happiness to you in your new life.”

Ludwig returned to Vienna two days later, and Georges, after dispatching his statues to Paris, travelled south to the sunshine of Naples. His house was ready for him and servants had been engaged. To those interested enough to inquire Georges said he was a graduate of the Vienna Medical University who craved the sunshine. He had long ago arranged with Ludwig to have diplomas sent him from Vienna each time he moved on, and these diplomas were well displayed in his surgery.

Naples was a city of complete contrast. From the fashionable Riviera di Chiaja to the west, to the indescribable slums which lay between the centre of the town and the Railway Station. Georges' house on the Chiaja was surrounded by the impressive residences of foreign diplomats and wealthy Neapolitans, and overlooked the bay, reputed to be the most beautiful in the world. The bay curved round and its outer extremities were marked with the islands of Capri and Ischia, while almost in the centre loomed the omnipresent Vesuvius, with its permanent cloud of black smoke curling up from its summit, reminding all who cared to recall that it had destroyed the city of Pompeii and could do the same to Naples if it chose. The Neapolitan life was easy and relaxed, unlike that of Rome, one hundred and fifty miles to the north. It suited Georges admirably and more and more he began to regret the fact that eventually he would be forced to move on. It was at times like this that he grabbed at his Eastern philosophy and accepted that the future would look after itself.

It took him six months to establish himself in practice, and he limited the number of patients he accepted, so as to be able to spend more time doing the things he enjoyed. These consisted of sculpture, and frequent boat trips to the Islands of Capri and Ischia. It was Capri that fascinated him the most, with its palaces of Tiberio, its incredible Grottoes, its two villages, one nestling low between the hills, the other, Anacapri, high on the island. He spent hours wandering through the terraced vineyards, climbing the steep sides of Monte Solaro which rose nearly two thousand feet on the west side of the island. At the summit he would sit and look at the bay of Naples spread out before him like a great canvas of the gods, the sun sparkling on the incredible blueness of the water, and in the distance the symmetrical cone of Vesuvius with its everpresent crown of smoke.

The visitors to his surgery comprised the diplomatic corps and a

smattering of wealthy Italians who considered it fashionable to have a foreign doctor. As before he became socially accepted almost immediately and the round of functions started. The opera, diplomatic receptions, the theatre. As an unattached bachelor he became in great demand and he had numerous love affairs of a temporary nature. He had no intention of allowing himself to become involved as he had been in Rome, so he was careful to make his intentions or lack of them clear from the outset. This way he enjoyed himself with no fear of repercussions.

Almost a year after he arrived in Naples Ludwig wrote to him from Vienna.

“I feel that you are wasting one of your great gifts, that of immunity to disease. There are many plague spots in the world where doctors are frightened to go. You could work there without fear and save many, many lives. Think on this, Georges, and let me know what you decide.”

Georges did think on it, and three weeks later he replied to Ludwig’s letter.

“I was reluctant to do what you suggested because I have spent too much time lately away from what we call civilization. And while it holds no particular charm for me, creature comforts have assumed quite an importance in my life. The jungles and the swamps of the plague spots hold for me very little attraction, so I have compromised. I have moved my centre of work two miles from my own front door, where I have found a place so riddled with disease that you would not believe it possible. I speak of the slums of Naples. Here in this great beauty is a growth of incredible evil which one day will erupt. There is cholera, dysentery, pox, malnutrition, and all this a stone’s throw from the Riviera di Chiaja where I live. When I mention this to the wealthy people who visit me they pretend not to know what is in their own back garden. As for the doctors, apart from a few dedicated men, they are too busy lancing a rich boil to look over their shoulder at what is behind them.”

Georges’ sudden interest in the slum area caused mixed reactions. A number of his former patients no longer came to him, while an equal number of people, driven by a guilty conscience, forsook their own doctor and turned to Georges. The slum inhabitants regarded him at first with mingled suspicion and distrust. Why should this fashionable doctor want to come and treat them, they thought. There must be an ulterior motive somewhere. But as no ulterior motive made itself known, their distrust began to dissolve and dislike changed to a feeling close to reverence. He opened a surgery in the centre of the slums and each morning when he arrived there was a long line of

people waiting patiently for him. The amount of work to be done far exceeded his capacity, and he took to cornering other doctors at social gatherings and at times succeeded in shaming them into spending a few hours a week among the slum inhabitants. One thing made itself abundantly clear to Georges, and that was unless something drastic was done to clear the slums, or at least provide them with an adequate and fresh water supply, there would eventually develop a major epidemic, probably of cholera, although typhus and typhoid were running a close second.

Many years later, Georges read about the great cholera epidemic that devastated the city, and he remembered his warnings. "Naples must be disembowelled," the Premier said when he visited the stricken city after the epidemic, which was another way of saying what Georges advocated now. But the city fathers had neither the interest nor the funds to do anything at this time, and Georges continued to devote a good proportion of his time attempting to check the spread of the septic growth in the centre of this beautiful city.

Ludwig visited him once during this ten year cycle, and he accompanied Georges to his surgery in the slums. Afterwards, he spoke to Georges with tears in his eyes.

"If this is the only good that comes from our great experiment, my Georges, then I shall be happy. That these people can say they are cured of their sickness, however few they may be, makes all the work we did so long ago more than worth while."

Georges was sixty now. Still exactly the same to look at as he had been five years before, Ludwig found it difficult at times to realize the full implications of what they had accomplished and he carried a photograph to remind him. A photograph of Georges and himself taken when they first started, with Georges looking as he did now, and himself just a fresh-faced, intense looking boy of twenty. Now he was forty-five, no longer fresh-faced, and with his hair already streaking with premature grey. He was a famous man, respected throughout the medical world, and he was contented. The grey hairs didn't disturb him, he accepted the progress of life and nothing would have persuaded him to accept the role that Georges had. At times he worried for Georges, not for his present condition, but for what it would be like fifty years hence. But then I shall not be around to know about it, he decided, so there was nothing to be gained by worrying. At least Georges seemed happy, and that was gratifying. He was using his gift, too, working where other doctors had feared to work.

Georges saw him off at the station at the end of his short visit.

"I won't see you for five years," said Ludwig. "Keep doing what you are, and stay happy."

Georges smiled at his friend.

"You stay healthy," he said. "I don't want a recurrence of what happened in Zurich five years ago."

He watched as the train drew out, seeing Ludwig leaning from the window. Then he returned to the life he had made for himself.

Five years later the slum inhabitants of Naples mourned the disappearance of the man they had come to rely on so much. It

seemed that one day he was there, the next he wasn't. The house on the Riviera di Chiaja was put up for sale and Doctor Georges Beauville was never seen in Naples again.

Lisbon welcomed to its ranks of doctors the new man, Doctor Georges Bellevue. His surgery became crowded with patients and his charm and obvious efficiency had a soothing effect on the Portuguese mentality. The ladies were charmed and comprised the major section of his clientele, and some of the younger ones chose to linger at the Doctor's house after normal visiting hours. But Georges managed these affairs with great tact and scandal was never attached to his name.

During the ten-year cycle he broke off work for a year and travelled into Spain, down to Gibraltar and across to the North African coast. Once among the simple-living people who eked out an existence at the edge of the Sahara, he was reminded once more of the sharply drawn line between his own people and these, who were brothers under the skin of the African tribe he had come to know and the Indian Holy Man.

He returned to Lisbon, his mind fresh and clear, and there he worked and played contentedly until Ludwig arrived once more to send him to another life.

He looked for a complete change this time, and sailed westwards across the South Atlantic to Rio de Janeiro. He took a house on the Avenida Rio Branco, in the centre of the fashionable quarter of the town, and immediately became inundated with clients. Europe was recognized as being the seat of the world's learning, and a graduate doctor from Vienna was automatically considered superior to the resident doctors of the city. In Rio, Georges found a parallel situation to the one he had known in Naples, although this time the scourge was yellow fever. The humid climate of the city was an admirable breeding ground for germs and periodically an epidemic would sweep through the poorer section of the city. At these times the rich would close their houses and move inland to their ranches and plantations, where secure from chance of infection they would live their feudal lives. Occasionally Georges received an invitation to stay at one of these ranches, and his days would be taken up in riding and hunting. He had become an expert shot since his days in Africa, principally due to his desire to excel at everything he turned to. Blessed with the advantage of unlimited time he could afford to work at a thing until he had mastered it. This was the case with his shooting, riding and with languages. Already fluent in German and Italian, apart from his native French, he learned Spanish, and then in preparation for the next ten-year cycle he started on English.

He found an English teacher among his clients in Rio. Her name was

Miss Primm, and she was governess to a wealthy Brazilian family. Her employer allowed her to visit Georges for two hours each week for the purpose of giving him his lessons. Her nature fitted her name, she was small, neat, and punctilious. She treated Georges as if he was one of her young charges, scolding him when he made mistakes in grammar and pronunciation. Georges found it refreshing. He had never met a woman like Miss Primm before. He had seen them in some of the great homes on the Continent, but they had remained shadowy, anonymous figures without a mind or personality of their own. Now he realized that they possessed both to a very marked degree. The English governesses served all over the world, leaving their indelible stamp on their charges, who started adult life with a healthy respect for the English and what the English stood for.

To these women England and the British Empire were the only things that mattered in the world. Anything that was not English was foreign, and as such could only be second rate. Through Miss Primm, Georges learned the English language, and enough about her people to decide that one day he would visit the country. He entertained the idea that he would make London his next home, then he decided that as he was already on the west side of the Atlantic he would remain there and move northwards to the United States. The Civil War was over and from what he had heard the country had settled down to an age of development. Great strides were being made in industry and technology, and the New World, as it was called, was attracting an enormous number of European immigrants.

When the time came for him to prepare for Ludwig's arrival in Rio, he began to sever his contacts one by one. He had found that if one had to disappear completely, it was easier to do so if one gradually cut the ties one had formed. This way when he finally disappeared there were few people who worried sufficiently to instigate any sort of an investigation. His statues, the result of his ten years work in Rio, were crated up and dispatched by a circuitous route to their eventual destination in Paris. When Ludwig arrived it needed only to do the operation, and he could leave Rio without trouble.

It had been ten years since the two men had met, and although Ludwig's health had improved, his appearance came as a shock to Georges. It was only at times like this when he was faced with someone from his original existence that he fully realized the incredible fact of his own immunity to human frailty.

Ludwig performed the operation the day after he arrived in Rio, and the two men caught the same boat to New York. There Ludwig embarked on a lecture tour and Georges took the overland route to San Francisco.

The open-handed hospitality of the Americans charmed him and within a year he was a regular member of the San Francisco society. Sensing a good catch the American mothers tried everything to land him for their daughters, but Georges was too elusive to be tied down. He had many affairs, one lasting for almost a year, but always at the back of his mind was the knowledge that he would have to move on.

Then six months before Ludwig was due to arrive, Georges met Avril Barnes.

The Barnes family were well-known and respected in San Francisco. Immensely wealthy, Mrs. Barnes was the uncrowned queen of society. There was no function that took place without she was on the committee, usually at the head of the table. Avril was an only child. All her life she had done exactly as she pleased, her parents granting her every wish almost before it was formulated. She and Georges met at a party, and Georges asked if he might model her. She was very beautiful, with wide blue eyes and fair hair. Her figure was perfect, and she took great pains to show it to its best advantage. Her dresses were always cut slightly lower in the bodice than was considered proper. Not quite low enough to be called vulgar, even if anyone had been inclined to call Avril Barnes that.

When she entered a room or a restaurant all eyes would automatically focus on her and watch her regal entrance. The women disliked her for what she did to their men, and the men thought that to make love to Avril Barnes must be the ultimate in sexual experience. Avril knew the disturbance she caused and she revelled in it. She loved to see the glint in men's eyes as they watched her, undressing her in their imagination, laying their hands on her perfect body. It gave her an immense feeling of power. This feeling was intensified by the fact that she had never had the slightest desire for a man to lay a finger on her, and while the men eyed her with thinly veiled lasciviousness, she would always look at the man's companion. She had long ago decided that the only real form of love making was that between women. Men with their clumsiness couldn't compare with the gentleness that there was between sympathetic women.

She was discreet in her perversion, only very few people knew of it, and these were the women she had been with, so it wasn't likely that they would talk about their experiences.

When Georges asked her to sit for him she thought she recognized a slightly different means which would lead to the same end. She had been going to refuse at first, but then she decided to accept. She knew how to take care of herself and he really was an excellent sculptor. So she had started sitting for him two hours every afternoon. After the third session when he had made no move towards her she began to

get angry. Just because she intended rejecting his advances, she thought, that was no reason for him not to make them, and gradually it developed into an obsession with her. She became determined to crack Georges' apparent indifference and relegate him to the level of the other men she knew.

It was the fifth afternoon that she posed for him. Georges worked in a converted attic above his house, having had a large north light window put in soon after he had arrived in San Francisco. He was modelling Avril to the waist in half life size, and under his skilful hands the clay was already beginning to assume a form and beauty of its own. After the first session Avril had learned that it was best to wear a dress that she could unbutton to the waist, and slip her arms out. This obviated removing the dress entirely. On this day she was sitting on a stool near the window while Georges worked on the model, stroking the clay into the shape he desired. The flat north light over her right shoulder picked out the whiteness of her nude upper body, relieved only by the pinkness at the tip of her breasts. After half an hour she stood up and stretched. Georges looked up from his work.

"Tired?" he asked.

"And hot," she said. "Georges, dear, would you mind awfully if I took my dress right off?"

Georges returned to his work.

"Please yourself, my dear," he said. "It makes no difference to me."

This last remark was all the encouragement she needed and in a few seconds she stepped out of the remainder of her clothes and resumed her place on the stool. There she purposely adopted a pose that she knew wasn't quite right. For a moment Georges worked on, then he looked up at her.

"No, Avril, you're not sitting correctly," he said.

She looked at him questioningly.

"Aren't I?" she said.

"Turn a little more to your left and raise your right arm higher."

She did as she was told, exaggerating the change in position. Georges watched her a moment then he put down the lump of clay he was working with and came over to her.

"No, Avril," he said patiently. "Pull your right arm down into your body like this."

He took her arm and drew it in closer to her, his hand brushing the tip of her breast as he did so. While this had no apparent effect on him, as far as she was concerned the effect was catastrophic. She caught her breath with a gasp as a feeling almost of pain shot through her. Then before she could pull herself together Georges had walked

away from her, back to the statue.

“This is not what I wanted at all,” she thought. “That touch did something to me, something I thought I was beyond.” She looked up at Georges, he was busy working again. He looked up at her, caught her staring at him, and smiled before he returned to his work. Finally she spoke.

“Georges.”

“Mm . . .” he didn’t look up.

“Do you think I’m beautiful?”

“You know I do,” he said, still without looking up.

“Desirable?”

“To some,” he said.

“But not to you?”

Now he put down his clay and walked over to a bowl of water in the corner and started to wash his hands.

“Don’t you find me desirable?” she repeated.

“No,” said Georges.

“Why not?”

He turned to look at her, drying his hands.

“Do you really want me to tell you?”

“Yes I do.”

“You’re beautiful, but it’s the beauty of marble. There’s no warmth in you. I get more satisfaction looking at a fine statue than at you. A statue has the warmth put into it by the artist, you haven’t.”

“I should be insulted,” she said. “I don’t know why I’m not.”

“Because you know it’s true,” said Georges. “You have a great beauty, one which can drive men mad, and you know it. You use this to make the men suffer and to seduce their wives.”

Avril gasped. This was the first time anyone had ever confronted her with her perversion, and for a moment she didn’t know what to say.

“How did you know?” she said finally.

“There are many things I know,” said Georges. “I have lived a full life.”

“You’re only thirty-five.”

“I’ve managed to cram a great deal into those thirty-five years, my dear. One of the things I’ve learned about is women, all sorts of women, including your sort.”

“I’ve never let a man make love to me,” she said.

“You’d better before it’s too late,” he said.

“The idea made me feel ill . . .” she said. “Up until now.”

“And now?”

“Now I want to.”

“Good,” said Georges. “I hope you find the lucky man soon.”

She stood up and walked towards him.

“I want you, Georges,” she said.

“That’s unfortunate, my dear,” said Georges easily. “I don’t want you.”

She moved close to him and put her bare arms around his neck, pressing her body to his.

“Please, Georges . . . please.”

He disengaged her arms and stood back.

“Try to remember how you felt the last time a man made advances to you,” he said. “Then you’ll know how I feel.”

Suddenly she was angry. She felt humiliated, an experience new to her.

“You can’t talk to me like that,” she said. He smiled.

“You invited it on yourself, my dear. Now get dressed. I’ve got work to do.” He turned his back on her. She pulled him round angrily and raising her right arm she aimed a blow at his face. He caught her wrist easily, and when she started to try and hit him with her left hand he put his arms around her, pinning her hands to her sides. She struggled helplessly for a moment, tears of frustration welling in her eyes. Then his grip tightened and she put her head back and looked at him. He was smiling, but it was a grim smile that frightened her.

“If it’s man you want,” he said. “A man you shall have.”

He changed his grip quickly, bending down and picking her up easily. She started to say something but he bent his head and placed his mouth over hers cutting off whatever it was she was going to say. Then he walked with her towards the divan. He put her down on the divan and she lay looking up him. He was staring at her, smiling no longer.

“I always intended this,” he said. “From the moment I first saw you. And I always get what I want, Avril, always.”

The affair was a violent one. Avril had always been used to having her own way and there had never been anyone who would dare to oppose her. Now there was someone, and for a while she couldn’t get used to it. She would try to exercise her will on Georges, but sometimes he would just laugh at her, other times he would get a hard glint in his eyes and walk out, leaving her. Although violent, the affair still

remained discreet. They met under the excuse of modelling for the statue, three afternoons a week. But the statue never seemed to progress beyond the stage it was in after the fifth sitting.

Then almost before the affair had started, thought Avril, Georges seemed to cool off. She first noticed it with the arrival of a friend of Georges' from Vienna, a Ludwig Weisz. Avril thought him a silly little man, but Georges obviously liked him, so at first she made no attempt to claim his time when he was with Ludwig. Then a week after Ludwig arrived they had a violent argument. She had arrived at the studio one afternoon to find her statue had been crated for dispatch. When she queried its destination, Georges had told her he was going away. She hadn't believed him at first, but finally he convinced her that what he said was true.

"I shall come with you then," she said.

"That's impossible," said Georges.

"You can't go away without me," she said. "Make up your mind on that right now."

At first he had been gentle, trying to reason with her, then as she had become more and more unreasonable, he started to lose his temper. Finally she slammed out of the studio uttering the threat that if he thought he could leave her he'd have another think coming to him.

That evening she returned to Georges' house, to have it out with him for the last time. Ludwig Weisz had gone to bed, said Georges, who was alone in his study, and please would Avril do him the courtesy of leaving, Georges had work to do. But Avril had no intention of leaving, and as time passed she noticed Georges becoming more and more anxious that he was left alone. This only increased her intention of staying until something definite had been decided. It was a little after midnight that Georges had tried to throw her out forcibly, but she had made so much noise that he eventually gave up, and started to plead with her. This was more like it, she thought, and she started to play on this new facet of Georges' personality. Eventually his pleas became frantic, and she noticed that he kept looking at the clock. Then quite suddenly he stopped pleading with her and his shoulders slumped. When she moved round to face him, what she saw made her open her mouth to scream with horror.

The disappearance of Avril Barnes caused an upheaval in the San Francisco Police Department. Notes were passed from the Governor himself to the chief police and thence down to the divisional detectives. "Find Avril Barnes or else." But she was never found, and months later the file on Avril Barnes was closed, unsolved.

In London, Harley Street absorbed the new arrival without a ripple to disturb its solid Victorian stability. The patients were slow to arrive at first, the English being reluctant to change their doctors without good cause. Then one night Lady Measham was taken ill with food poisoning. Her own doctor was unavailable, being out of town, and her frantic servant had looked for the nearest brass plate and rang the bell until the door was answered.

"Yes, Doctor Braun is in," said the manservant who answered the door.

Lady Measham's servant talked for ten minutes without stopping when he met the good looking young doctor, and the doctor packed a small bag and accompanied him back to Lady Measham's house in Belgrave Square.

The judicious use, of a stomach pump combined with a strong dose of emetic, had soon put Lady Measham on her feet again. But the old dowager treated her cure as a miracle and suddenly Doctor Georges Braun became fashionable, as Lady Measham's friends started to crowd the surgery.

To Georges it was the pattern as before. A year to consolidate his position, then the settling down to the old life. A new place, new circle of acquaintances, new mistresses, but it was as before, and one day he suddenly realized this was as it would always be. He was ninety years old, the time when he should be dead or at least watching the approach of death. Perhaps if he or Ludwig had been able to find the ultimate solution obviating the ten year cycle things would have been different. But they were no nearer this than they had been when they started, and Ludwig had long ago come to the conclusion that the final secret would always remain locked in the realms of the unknown. His vast knowledge of glands and their peculiarities, gained over the years, had convinced him that it would be necessary to renew Georges' uter-parathyroid for as long as Georges wanted to go on living. Georges still worked spasmodically in an attempt to find this solution, but his knowledge of glands was far inferior to Ludwig's and he never really hoped that he had a chance where Ludwig had failed.

And with the realization that this was to be his life until he himself decided to put an end to it, Georges began to indulge in excesses in an effort to find new experiences to enjoy, new fields to conquer. He took up painting and discarded it almost immediately, returning to his first love, sculpture. He branched out to a little known field of medicine, mental disturbances, but he soon tired of this, too, and after publishing a couple of papers which were widely acclaimed, he switched his talents to something else. And London looked at this man

of thirty-five who was so gifted, and marvelled. He was a regular topic of conversation over the dinner and tea tables of the wealthy. It didn't disturb anyone that he had appeared two years earlier, apparently from nowhere, they assumed that he had always been around near by and he only became known as he became prominent.

As the demand for his medical services became larger, so he grew less interested in this side of his life and devoted more time to his sculpturing. With only two hours a day to spare for medicine, the waiting list of clients grew longer and longer, and his fees spiralled accordingly. He could ask four times the fee of any other surgeon and still they would clamour for his attention.

His love affairs were numerous but always discreet. The discretion was not through any particular desire of his, but because the object of his desires was invariably a woman from a good family who would have been mortified to have been involved in a scandal. It was greatly to his credit that he was able to remain outside involvements that reached further than the bedroom. The unmarried women who became his lovers would all have married him without hesitation, and been delighted to do so, but he handled his affairs with such consummate tact, that beyond an occasional argument he had no trouble. Men envied him. Women worshipped him, and he managed to hold himself above both, while still retaining the respect of all.

The affair of Lady Jane Bartholomew was the nearest he came to being trapped into matrimony. After a short and rather violent affair she had come to him and told him she was pregnant. He was genuinely distressed, realizing the stigma attached to a mother who bore a bastard child. He even considered marrying her and divorcing her later in time to enter the next ten year cycle. Then a young man had appeared in his surgery complaining of violent headaches. He had examined him and came to the conclusion that the man was close to a nervous breakdown. Careful probing had unearthed the fact that the man was desperately in love with a girl who not only didn't reciprocate his feelings, but behaved as promiscuously as she could in order to hurt him. He knew of five lovers she had taken, and that was only the half of it, he said. Fortunately he didn't know the other half, the woman in question being Jane Bartholomew. The next time Jane came to see him Georges threatened to expose her promiscuity to public gaze. He never heard from her again, and she didn't have the threatened child.

In the middle of this ten year cycle a cholera epidemic broke out in Italy, and Georges received a letter from Ludwig begging him to go and do what he could to help. Feeling in need of a change Georges packed overnight and the following day found him on his way to the trouble spot. He worked among the dying for six months until the

epidemic had been stamped out. The day before he was due to travel back to London he called on the old priest who had worked by his side during the past six months.

The priest's gratitude was immense. That a great and important doctor from London should come to his little town to nurse his sick parishioners, was to him a wonderful thing, a gift from God. And this is what he told Georges. Georges had been amused at first, that he should be considered one of God's gifts. But the old priest had been so sincere that Georges found himself listening to what he was saying.

"You have been given gifts, my son," he said. "The gift to heal, the gift of knowledge that can help those who are sick and suffering. So many of your kind use this gift to further their own selves, without a thought for those they minister to. You are different, you have worked among us for six dangerous months with no thought of material reward. Your reward must then be spiritual, and if this is so, my son, I truly rejoice, for you are indeed a man of God."

And the man of God returned to fashionable London to find himself lionized for what he had done. His deliberate venture into the plague area assumed the proportions of a crusade, and he was asked to address meetings, endorse fund raising campaigns and preside at charity meetings.

Then one day he walked into his surgery to find that his patient was a man he had known in Rio twenty years before. This was an eventuality he had always borne in mind, but now that it had actually happened he was considerably shaken. He examined the man, whose name was Carlo, and quickly diagnosed a growth which would have to be removed surgically. Then while Carlo was dressing after the examination he noticed the South American was looking at him curiously. He waited for the inevitable.

"Have you ever been to Rio, Doctor?" Carlo asked finally.

"Yes, I have," said Georges. "A beautiful spot."

"You remind me very much of someone I used to know there," said Carlo.

"Really," said Georges.

"It was some time ago now," said Carlo. "But I rarely forget a face."

"How long ago?" said Georges.

"It must be twenty years now," said Carlo.

Georges smiled.

"I was fourteen years old then, how old was your friend?"

"He was about the age you are now."

"Then it could hardly have been me, could it?" said Georges. It was as simple as that. But afterwards Georges was more careful. Twenty

years had enabled him to point out to Carlo the fact that he couldn't possibly be the same man. But what if he should meet someone from America, someone he had known five years earlier. He made sure after that, that he was warned when he was going to meet Americans, and he never entered a room of strangers without a quick look at their faces from the door.

The time passed quickly and Georges soon found himself preparing for Ludwig's arrival. The first thing to do was to obtain a uter-parathyroid. This was comparatively simple as he had taken lately to performing post-mortems for one of the larger London hospitals. Whenever an expert opinion was required to establish cause of death, Georges was invited to perform the post-mortem. He chose a subject who had died from a cerebral seizure, and it was the work of a moment to remove the uter-parathyroid and slip it into a small jar that he had in his pocket.

Later, back in his laboratory he transferred the gland into a flask and started the treatment necessary to revitalize it ready for Ludwig's arrival.

At the same time he started to gather in the threads of his existence, ready to cut them completely when the time should come for him to leave. His beloved statues he had crated up and shipped to Paris, all except the one he was at present engaged on. It was a bust of a woman who had come into his surgery three months earlier. She was not young, owing to thirty years and probably possessing five on top of that, thought Georges. But she had a strange madonna-like quality in her face and the second time she came to see him Georges asked her to pose for him. She had accepted readily and sittings had started immediately.

Her name was Sarah Longfellow, she was the daughter of a North-country manufacturer who had made a great deal of money and come to London to settle down and spend it. She was unmarried and as far as Georges could ascertain, unattached.

She was an ideal model, sitting for hours with her hands clasped neatly in front of her, her head held just at the right angle. Georges was doing a head and shoulders only, so it was unnecessary for her to remove any of her clothes for these sessions.

They would talk while Georges worked and she proved to have a remarkably agile mind, which covered numerous subjects including medicine. She would have liked to have been a doctor, she said, and she could never forgive herself that she hadn't been born a man which would have allowed her to achieve her ambition. As it was she contented herself with reading medical text books which she had to

keep hidden at home, her father considering embroidery being the only pursuit suitable for a young woman.

“Why have you never married, Sarah?” Georges asked her one day.

“I’ve looked after father since mother died,” she said without rancour. “And apart from that I’ve never met a man I should like to share my life with.”

“You’ve never been in love?” said Georges with a smile.

“I’ve been infatuated,” she said. “But the thought that here was a man I would have to spend the remainder of my life with, always put me off. Now it’s too late.”

“Why is it too late, you’re only thirty.”

“Actually I’m thirty-five,” she said. “One womanly trait I seem to have retained is that of lying about my age. I’m sorry.”

“There’s no need to apologize,” said Georges.

“I’m apologizing because it was you I lied to. The lie is permissible to most of the people one meets, with you I feel it’s different.”

Georges looked up from his work quickly, but there was nothing to be read in her expression. He continued to work for a moment then curiosity overcame him.

“Why am I different?” he said.

“You just are,” she said. “With you I feel pretence is unnecessary and cheap. You’re so much older than I am.”

Georges looked up again, startled.

“I’m thirty-five,” he said.

“I know, that’s what you look,” said Sarah. “But I feel that you’re older than that, far older.”

“You’re not making much sense,” said Georges carefully.

“You’re old in experience,” said Sarah. “You have the knowledge and the bearing of a man twice your age. You must have lived a very full life.”

Georges relaxed slowly.

“I’ve been lucky,” he said.

“It’s more than luck,” she said. “To live properly one has got to make an effort. It just doesn’t happen by itself. One has got to go out and look for life, not wait for life to come looking for you.”

“A philosopher,” said Georges with a smile.

“Where were you before you came to London?” said Sarah suddenly.

There was a moment’s pause before Georges replied.

“I was in Italy,” he said.

“But you went from London to Italy. I mean before you came to London in the first place?”

“What makes you think I came to London at all. I could have been here all the time.”

“You could have, but you weren’t, not ten years ago anyway.”

“You know an awful lot about me,” said Georges carefully.

“I wanted to find out these things, so I looked,” said Sarah. “It wasn’t clever.”

“May I know why you wanted to find out?” asked Georges.

“I like you,” she said. “I like to know all about the people I like.”

“I’m flattered,” said Georges. “But why didn’t you ask me, why did you take this roundabout way?”

“You would have become conceited if you’d known I was interested,” she said.

“And now I’m not supposed to become conceited?”

“Now it doesn’t matter any more,” she said evenly.

“If there’s a message contained in that remark I’m afraid it evades me,” said Georges.

“Simply that now I know you better I realize you aren’t conceited and there’s nothing that would make you that way.”

“I am flattered again,” said Georges.

“You’re not really, you’re not the sort of man who is taken in by flattery.”

“I didn’t say I was ‘taken in’, but one likes to hear it nevertheless.”

“Would you like to meet my father?” she said. Again she surprised Georges.

“Yes I would,” he lied.

“Come to dinner this evening,” she said.

Georges searched around quickly for an excuse, then he thought, why not. He had nothing to do that evening, and even if the old man turned out to be a bore, as he strongly suspected he would, at least Sarah’s conversation was stimulating.

“I’d like that very much,” he said.

At eight that evening he was ringing the doorbell at an imposing looking house in Kensington. The door was opened by a manservant who took his coat and conducted him to the drawing-room on the first floor. A minute later Sarah’s father came in. The first thing that struck Georges was that Longfellow was far too young to be Sarah’s father. He was a tall man, with a strong face and black hair. Beautifully dressed, he carried himself well and to Georges he appeared the

complete antithesis of what a retired North-country business man should be. He apologized for keeping Georges waiting, and said that Sarah would be a few moments finishing dressing.

“A drink, Doctor Braun?” he said.

“Thank you,” said Georges.

When they both had drinks, Longfellow sat down opposite Georges.

“You’ve made a big impression on Sarah,” he said. There was the faintest hint of the North-country brogue in his speech.

“She’s a very charming woman,” said Georges.

“She tells me this statue you’re doing of her is very good.”

“It’s just a pastime,” said Georges. “It helps take my mind off my work.”

“From what I hear your work as a doctor must be extremely lucrative.”

“I make a reasonable living,” said Georges, wondering why the conversation had taken this turn.

“It must be extremely satisfying to be able to relegate one’s work to a position where it allows one to indulge in pursuits designed purely to please one’s artistic sense.”

“I am fortunate,” said Georges. “It seems luck has favoured me.”

“You belittle yourself, Doctor Braun. You are quite a celebrity, you know. The brilliant young doctor, successful, altruistic.”

“Altruistic?”

“That business of going off to Italy a few months ago. I consider that altruistic.”

“I wanted to learn about cholera,” said Georges.

“That’s altruistic in itself,” said Longfellow. “Most doctors don’t bother about such things because they feel they’re never going to be called on to deal with a case.”

At this moment Sarah came in. She was wearing a plain, high necked dress which served to emphasize the madonna-like quality of her face. Both men stood up until she was seated.

“Doctor Braun was telling me that he doesn’t consider what he did in Italy was altruistic, my dear,” said Longfellow.

“You will find that Georges constantly belittles himself, father,” said Sarah.

“Never do that, Doctor,” said Longfellow. “I have learned in this life that one will always be belittled by the other person, so why do it yourself.”

He got to his feet.

“Shall we go in to dinner.”

Dinner was served by two liveried footmen, and was magnificently prepared. Afterwards instead of lingering over coffee and liqueurs the three of them returned to the sitting-room. Throughout dinner, Georges had noticed that the conversation had been of a probing nature. Delicately veiled, it was still designed to bring Georges out, and on a couple of occasions he just managed to check himself before making a remark that would have opened a door to his past. But such was the apparent friendliness of his host and Sarah that he decided the reason for their interest was genuine desire to know more about him. At one time he decided that Longfellow was deciding whether or not he would make a good son-in-law. But he dismissed this when he realized that Sarah was not the sort of woman to be subject to anyone's will, even her father's. If Sarah was considering him as a prospective husband, Georges decided, nothing that Longfellow would do or say would have any bearing on the outcome.

An hour after they had come in from dinner Longfellow made the remark that provided the clue to the whole evening.

“You were in America, weren’t you?” he said.

“I’ve been to America,” said Georges carefully.

“San Francisco?” said Longfellow.

“Once,” said Georges. “For a short time.”

“We know San Francisco well, don’t we, Sarah?”

“Yes, we do.”

“It’s a charming city,” said Georges.

“The people are so nice,” said Sarah. “Did you know anyone named Barnes while you were there?”

So this is it, thought Georges. He felt himself tighten up inside, a feeling of nervousness combined with exhilaration at the thought of the forthcoming battle.

“No, I don’t think I did,” said Georges evenly.

“Very prominent family,” said Longfellow.

“I wasn’t there for long,” said Georges. “I met very few of the people who lived there.”

“There was a daughter, wasn’t there, Sarah?” said Longfellow.

“Avril.”

“That’s right. Poor Avril.”

“Why poor Avril?” said Georges.

“She disappeared. Just disappeared completely, nobody ever discovered what happened to her.”

“Not an uncommon occurrence,” said Georges.

"Not when one's discussing ordinary young women with no background. But Avril Barnes was not ordinary, and she had a background which to say the least, was far from non-existent."

"Perhaps she ran away," said Georges.

"Yes, but if she had she would have run somewhere. The Barnes family spent a fortune trying to find her. It's inconceivable that had she been alive she wouldn't have been found."

"If a person wants to remain anonymous it's not very difficult," said Georges.

"You should know," said Longfellow evenly.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand you," said Georges.

"Don't you, Braun," said Longfellow. "Don't you really."

"Let's say I am beginning to follow the general trend of your conversation, but I am finding it far too entertaining to allow it to finish. Pray continue."

Longfellow flashed Sarah a look, then he turned back to Georges.

"I'm glad you find it entertaining," he said. "Let's see how much more entertainment you can draw from the situation."

Georges nodded.

"Avril Barnes was having an affair with a doctor when she disappeared. The doctor disappeared at the same time. What's more natural than to assume they disappeared together, ran away."

"Quite," said Georges.

"But it wouldn't have been like that," continued Longfellow. "Why should it? The doctor was rich and successful and unmarried. Avril Barnes was rich and unmarried. They had no cause to disappear when there was so much for them right where they were."

"Go on," prompted Georges.

"I have spent ten years on and off looking for either Avril or the doctor. I have done this because I felt that should I be fortunate enough to find either one it would be to my advantage financially."

"What would a successful retired North-country business man be worried about finances for?" said Georges.

"If I was that, I wouldn't be worried about finances," said Longfellow. "Successful I am to a degree, but retired, North-country or business man, I am not," he said.

"Neither is this woman here your daughter, I assume," said Georges.

"Sarah is my wife," said Longfellow.

"My congratulations," said Georges with a little bow to Sarah. She looked away quickly.

"Now we have dispensed with the formalities," said Georges.

“Suppose we discuss what you have in mind.”

Longfellow leaned forward, excitement showing in his eyes for the first time.

“You will pay me five thousand pounds cash,” he said. “And two thousand pounds a year for ten years.”

Georges looked at him steadily for a moment, then he smiled.

“What exactly would I be buying for this vast sum of money?”

“Silence.”

“And if I decline to pay you?”

“We shall let it be known that you were the doctor who disappeared ten years ago from San Francisco.”

“But are you sure I am this doctor you talk of?”

“We’re sure.”

“Ten years ago I would have been twenty-five. Was I a good doctor?”

“You know whether you were or not.”

“You tell me.”

“The doctor we are talking about was extremely successful, prosperous and a first-class sculptor.”

“All this at twenty-five?” said Georges.

Longfellow looked quickly at Sarah, then back at Georges.

“It sounds extraordinary I know, but obviously you are a man of great talent, Doctor. You have great understanding too, that’s why we know you will do as we ask.”

“Assuming for one moment that I am the man you think I am, why should I not want it known that I resided in San Francisco ten years ago?”

“Come, Doctor.”

“This affair of Miss . . . Miss . . . ?”

“Miss Barnes.”

“Miss Barnes. Just because I chose to leave San Francisco at the same time as she did could be mere coincidence.”

“It could, but it wasn’t, was it?”

Georges stood up.

“I have had a most entertaining evening. Now I must be leaving, I have work to do.”

“Not before you agree to our demands,” said Longfellow rising too.

“But of course I agree,” said Georges. “What was it again, five thousand pounds cash and two thousand a year for ten years. You wouldn’t rather have the whole twenty-five thousand in cash, would

you?"

"You seem to be treating the matter as some sort of a joke, Doctor Braun. I assure you it is not."

"Neither am I treating it as such," said Georges. "Perhaps you're right though. Twenty-five thousand pounds cash would be too much for you to handle all at once. When do you wish the first payment?"

"Tomorrow," said Longfellow.

"If you come to my house at seven-thirty I'll have it for you."

Five minutes later Georges was walking home. He was extremely worried. His only satisfaction was that he hadn't given Longfellow and Sarah the pleasure of knowing it. That they had to be silenced there was no doubt, but he didn't consider paying them money was the correct way of going about it. For one moment he rather wished he was nearer the end of the ten year cycle. If he had started taking the fluid the problem would have been solved for him, his actions when under its influence being unpredictable and violent. He considered disappearing immediately and contacting Ludwig to meet him elsewhere. At least he was prepared to disappear, bringing it forward two weeks would not have proved difficult. But then Longfellow was obviously a very thorough man. It had been no mean feat to track him down as it was. If he ran away now, Longfellow would find him again and the same problem would have to be faced. He arrived home without having made up his mind how the situation was going to be handled.

He went into the laboratory and checked on the uter-parathyroid which was being revitalised ready for Ludwig's arrival. It was while he was examining it that a rather grim idea came to him causing him to smile to himself. Then locking the laboratory he went to bed.

The following morning he sent his manservant to his bank to draw out five thousand pounds. The bank had already been warned that he would be making substantial withdrawals during the next two weeks, and the servant had no trouble collecting the money.

When the money had been handed to George he told his staff that he wasn't to be disturbed and he locked himself in his study. He spent the day writing in the large leather bound volume that contained the history of the experiment since its inception. At the end of each ten year cycle he made copious entries in this volume, recording what he felt mentally and physically. He checked his own condition thoroughly, testing reflexes, reactions, blood pressure, and general bodily state. He noted as always that throughout the ten years he had not suffered any illness or physical disability. This in spite of the fact that he had spent six months in one of the great plague spots of Europe. His eyesight was perfect, his teeth sound, his hair still without a trace of grey. In all he was exactly as he had been sixty years before in Vienna. Almost exactly, thought Georges, for now he was ninety-five.

At six-thirty he had some food sent in to him and after he had eaten he sat to wait for Longfellow. He had decided that Longfellow would have to be killed. There was no reasonable alternative that would ensure he wasn't troubled by the man again. He didn't like the idea of

killing, it went against his natural respect for human life, which was sharpened because he was a doctor trained to preserve life, not to destroy it. But by killing Longfellow he felt that he would be preserving a life, that of his own. And wasn't his own life of far greater importance than that of a common blackmailer. He realized that it would be necessary at the same time to kill Sarah, but he accepted the necessity as he accepted it for her husband.

Longfellow was very prompt, arriving at exactly seven-thirty. He was alone as Georges had hoped and expected he would be. Georges' manservant showed Longfellow into the study and Georges told him he could take the remainder of the evening off. Longfellow was confident and easy in his manner and seemed in no particular hurry to complete the transaction. He walked round the study examining Georges' books.

"I envy you your books, Doctor," he said. "It has long been my ambition to have a library of my own."

"You seem to do very well financially in your . . . your trade," said Georges. "Why don't you start one?"

"Sarah and I have no home," said Longfellow. "A good library must have a permanent home."

"What about that house of yours in Kensington?"

"Rented," said Longfellow. "Along with all the furniture and stuff. Not very satisfactory but adequate for our needs."

"Now I suppose you'll move on?" said Georges.

"Probably," said Longfellow. "But you needn't worry, I'll let you know where to send the money for the next ten years."

"I was sure you would," said Georges. "One thing that interests me, Longfellow. How did you locate me?"

"Sarah and I have made it our work," said Longfellow. "The longer one works the more skilled one becomes in any profession. We look for the unusual, the disappearing woman, the husband who has just lost his rich wife, the wife who has just lost her rich husband. In ninety cases out of a hundred there is nothing unusual to find, and we have wasted our time. Then occasionally we find we're lucky and someone is prepared to pay to keep certain facts quiet. You for example."

"Interesting," said Georges.

"We are still enjoying the proceeds of a case we investigated five years ago," said Longfellow, warming to the task. "We read of a man whose wife had just had an accident which killed her. She left him a considerable amount of money. We visited this man, at least Sarah

did, and told him she had seen the accident. That's all she said, Doctor. 'I saw the accident that happened to your wife.' Now if the wife had in fact died as the result of an ordinary accident, he would have said 'how interesting' or something equally banal. But she hadn't, and what he said was 'how much do you want?' It was as simple as that. We didn't know anything at all, and the man told us everything by asking us how much we wanted."

"Very clever," said Georges. "I can see you've made an intensive study of human nature."

"One has to in my business," said Longfellow. "Now you have the money, I take it?"

"I have it," said Georges. He took an envelope from his pocket and handed it to Longfellow, who put it straight into his pocket.

"Aren't you going to count it?" asked Georges.

Longfellow smiled.

"It's not necessary," he said. "All the time I have been doing this work I have never once been underpaid."

"People are honest," said Georges.

"People are careful," corrected Longfellow. "Now if you will excuse me I must return to Sarah who is waiting at home for me."

"Before you go, Longfellow, there's one thing I'd like to ask you."

"What is it?"

"Will you have a drink?"

"Thank you," said Longfellow.

Georges poured two drinks and carried one to Longfellow.

"What did you want to ask me?" said Longfellow.

"In this particular transaction has it never worried you that I am only thirty-five years old."

An expression of doubt crept into Longfellow's face.

"To tell you the truth it has worried me. As you said last night, you could only have been twenty-five in San Francisco."

"Twenty-five when I left," said Georges. "How far back beyond that point did your investigations take you?"

Longfellow smiled.

"You weren't hard to trace back," said Longfellow. "You were quite a celebrity."

"But how long?" persisted Georges.

"I don't know," said Longfellow. "I did meet a fellow doctor of yours who said he'd known you since you started practising."

"Did he say how long that was?"

Longfellow looked at Georges curiously.

“Why are you asking me this?”

“Did he?” said Georges.

“About eight years, he said,” said Longfellow.

“Eight years. Eight from twenty-five leaves seventeen. You mean to say I started practising medicine in San Francisco when I was seventeen years old.”

There was a pause while Longfellow tried to work it out, then he looked up at Georges.

“He must have made a mistake,” he said.

“That’s one answer,” said Georges. “There is another.”

“What’s that?”

“Actually I’ve got two, you can take your pick. One is that I’m not the doctor you think I am, and two is I’m a great deal older than I appear.”

“Then you must be older than you appear,” said Longfellow. He tapped the pocket where he had put the money.

“You’re most certainly the doctor I think you are or you wouldn’t have given me this money.”

“How old would you think I am?” said Georges.

“Does it matter?” said Longfellow.

“Not really, but I should like your opinion.”

Longfellow looked at him for a moment. “Working back arithmetically I’d say you were about forty-five. But that’s only because of what I know, you still look a very good thirty-five.”

“What would you say if I told you I was ninety-five?”

“I’d tell you to go and see a doctor,” said Longfellow with a laugh.

“What if I told you that sixty years ago I discovered the secret of perpetual life?”

“I’d go and see the doctor as soon as possible, if I were you.”

“Wouldn’t you be interested in finding out whether by some incredible chance it was true? Think what it would mean, Longfellow, always to remain just as you are physically, while your mind develops continually. Eventually you must become a superman among men, with the knowledge you could accumulate.”

“Very nice if it were possible,” said Longfellow.

“I’m telling you the truth Longfellow, every word I say is true. I was born in Vienna ninety-five years ago.”

Longfellow looked at him curiously.

“You really mean all this, don’t you,” he said. “You believe it

yourself."

"I believe it because it's true," said Georges.

"Just suppose for one minute it is true, why are you telling me?"

"Aren't you interested?"

"Very, but I imagine this is something very few people know about."

"You're the first person I have ever told. I wanted to see what your reactions would be."

"Aren't you worried now that I have more knowledge of you which I could use later?"

"No," said Georges. "Because you won't be able to use it."

"I don't see why not. It could be very useful to me."

"Hardly," said Georges. "You'll be dead in two minutes."

Longfellow smiled, then he saw that Georges meant it. He looked into the empty glass in his hand, then up at Georges who was looking at him in a detached manner.

"You've poisoned me," Longfellow said at last.

"I have," said Georges.

Longfellow jumped to his feet and started towards the door.

"It's no use going for help, Mr. Longfellow, you are past it."

Longfellow reached the door, then as he tried to open it a muscular spasm doubled him over in pain. He groped his way back to a chair and flopped down. After a moment he looked up at Georges. His face was covered in sweat and his eyes were glazed over with pain.

"Do something for me, Braun, don't let me die," he said with difficulty.

"I could save you," said Georges easily, "but I'm not going to. No doubt you would swear by all you hold sacred that you would leave me alone for the rest of my life . . ."

"I would . . . I swear it . . ."

"But I doubt that you would keep your word. Your sort seldom do. I'm sorry, Longfellow, I must allow you to die."

"Sarah, she'll make sure you don't get away with this, she'll see that you hang."

"I don't think so," said Georges. "I don't think so."

He watched while Longfellow became doubled up with another spasm. When it had passed Longfellow seemed to have accepted the fact that he was going to die. He didn't speak again. His pain-filled eyes watched Georges steadily for a few moments. Then came another spasm, and a minute later he died without a sound.

Georges dragged him into his laboratory and there he stripped the

clothes off him. He lifted the body on to the surgical table, then donned a rubber apron and a pair of rubber gloves. He made an incision under the breast bone. It was a matter of moments to remove the uter-parathyroid which he placed carefully into a jar of colourless fluid. Then he fetched the large surgical saws and scalpels used for dissection. He removed the arms, cutting them off at the shoulders, the legs he amputated at the groin. The last thing was the head. This he cut off and placed with the other limbs on a sheet of rubber he had spread on the floor. Then he moved over to the corner of the laboratory and uncovered a large vat filled with colourless fluid. One by one he lowered the severed limbs into the vat until the level of the liquid rose to the edge. Then he re-covered the vat and moving back to the table he lifted the torso and placed it on the rubber sheet. He folded the sheet around the torso and dragged the bundle into a corner of the room. Then he started to clean up. The room was saturated in blood. It covered the floor, the table, and in one place had even spurted against the wall. He scrubbed the place well, using a great deal of fresh water. After two hours he was satisfied.

He uncovered the vat again and looked inside. All that remained of the limbs was a layer of scum that stuck to the side of the vat where the level of the liquid had dropped as the solidity was eaten away from the flesh. Using a long handled ladle, he baled out some of the liquid and flushed it down the sink. Then he unwrapped the torso from the rubber sheet and lowered it carefully into the vat. He folded the sheet and put it away in a cupboard. Then covering the vat once more, he removed his apron and gloves. He paused at the door to the laboratory for a final look around. Then he went out, shutting the door behind him. Upstairs, he changed quickly, and left the house fifteen minutes later.

The same manservant opened the door to him and told him that Mrs. Longfellow was in the library. He was shown in a moment later, to find Sarah on her feet waiting for him. He spoke before she could ask him anything.

“I waited from seven-thirty until now,” he said. “Where’s your husband?”

“Didn’t he come to see you?”

“No, he didn’t. I had the money all ready for him. What’s happening, are you playing some trick on me?”

She looked worried.

“He left here at seven-fifteen,” she said. “He was coming straight round to see you.”

“I trust that he met with some sort of accident,” said Georges.

“Preferably fatal.”

She turned on him quickly.

“You needn’t think this means you’ll get out of paying. If anything has happened to him you’ll be paying me.”

“That’s what I thought,” said Georges. “So I’ve brought the money with me.”

He pulled from his pocket the envelope holding the money he had handed to Longfellow earlier.

She reached out for it greedily. Unlike Longfellow she counted it before putting it in a bureau drawer. Then she turned back to Georges who was watching her.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” she said.

“I rather hoped I could be present when you heard what has happened to your husband.”

For the first time she looked suspicious.

“You seem very sure something has happened to him.”

“Not at all,” said Georges. “Just that I have wished so strongly for him to meet an unpleasant fate that I am eager to see this wish fulfilled.”

“I’ll let you know,” said Sarah. “If it will please you.”

“Thank you,” said Georges. “It will please me immensely.”

He turned towards the door. Then as though he had suddenly recalled something, he turned back to her.

“Your statue, my dear, I should still like to finish it.”

She looked at him for a moment, then laughed.

“You really are a strange one, Georges. You accept the fact that we are blackmailing you, without any sign of excitement or protest. And now you still want to finish my statue.”

“Your face is still the same, my dear. Strange as it may seem, I still see the madonna in your eyes. What attracted me about you originally still applies.”

She looked at him, her head tilted to one side.

“All right,” she said finally. “I’ll ask my husband.”

“Providing you still have a husband,” said Georges.

“Rest assured I have, he’s far too clever a man to allow anything to happen to him.”

“Really,” said Georges, non-committally. “Eleven tomorrow, shall we say then.”

“Very well.”

He wished her good night and left. He walked home slowly. He was pleased with the way things had worked out, and he felt a pleasant feeling of exhilaration. Here was the excitement he had been missing for so long. Here was something that taxed his ingenuity and somehow filled an emptiness in his existence that had been growing through the years. His thoughts led him to an interesting academic point. If he was apprehended for the murder of Longfellow and subsequently hanged for the crime, how would he die, or would he in fact die at all? Would his body revert to the state that it should be in now that he was ninety-five, or would he always remain with the appearance of a man of thirty-five.

He was still musing on this when he let himself into the house and walked through to the laboratory. He uncovered the vat. Nothing remained of Longfellow except a sludge resting at the bottom of the vat and a thin line of scum covering the surface. Humming quietly to himself he prepared to drain away the fluid.

Sarah Longfellow arrived at eleven the following morning and she was shown up to Georges' studio where he was already at work.

“Good morning, my dear,” said Georges.

She looked worried now, worried and uneasy.

“I trust your husband put in an appearance last night.”

“He didn’t come home,” said Sarah. “That’s one of the reasons I came to see you. Are you sure he didn’t come here last night?”

“If he had come here why should I have bothered to visit you to hand you the money. You have it safe, I trust?”

“I have it here,” she said, tapping her bag. “Georges, will you help me find him?” she said suddenly.

Georges smiled.

“Of course I will, my dear. Where do you suggest we look?”

“I don’t know. I suppose we should contact the police.”

“Is that wise. You and your husband are engaged in a profession that isn’t exactly approved of by English Law.”

“The hospitals then, you could ask at the hospitals, in case he’s had an accident.”

“Did it not occur to you, my dear, that he might just have left you?”

“It did occur to me, but he wouldn’t have done that without the money.”

“Meaning that there was a possibility he would if he had the money?”

“I didn’t say that,” said Sarah quickly.

“No, I did,” said Georges. “But you’re probably right. Now if you’d like to take up the pose we can start work.”

“But you said you’d help me find him,” said Sarah.

“I will, my dear. But we can hardly wander round London just looking for him. A few discreet inquiries into the right ears, that’s the way to accomplish it. Leave it to me.”

He worked on the bust of Sarah for an hour, and for once she was not the composed model he was used to. She fidgeted a great deal, and finally Georges walked over to her.

“I don’t think we’ll work any more today, Sarah,” he said. “We’d better do something about finding this husband of yours, you’re no good as a model while you’re worrying about him this way.”

Georges ordered the carriage and they left the house together. He told the driver to take him to the hospital close to Kensington Gardens. Leaving Sarah in the carriage he went into the hospital. He spent fifteen minutes browsing in the reading-room, then he came out and got into the carriage again.

“There’s no news of him in there,” he said in answer to Sarah’s question. “We’ll try another hospital.”

At three more hospitals Georges did the same thing, leaving Sarah in the carriage and returning fifteen minutes later telling her there was no news.

After the fourth visit, Georges climbed back into the carriage looking very worried.

“I think you ought to go to the police, my dear,” he said. “Perhaps he was arrested for something and he’s being held in some police station.”

“Why wouldn’t he have contacted me?” she said.

Georges shrugged.

“Perhaps he isn’t allowed to. Now don’t forget you are a woman who is desperately worried about the fact that her husband has disappeared.”

“I am,” she said.

“I know, my dear, but for the benefit of the police, act a little. They’re more likely to take pity on you, and if they are holding him he may stand a better chance. Not many men, even policemen, are immune to the effects of a woman’s tears. There’s a police station just around the corner from here, if you’re ready we’ll go there now.”

She nodded, and Georges told the driver to take them to the police station.

Before she went in he reminded her once more to make a big fuss over the disappearance of her husband.

“Soften the hard heart of officialdom,” he said. When Sarah came out twenty minutes later, her eyes were still filled with tears. She told Georges that the police had no news of Longfellow, but she gave them his description and they had promised to contact her should they learn anything. She was told to go home and wait for news.

“Then that’s where I’ll take you,” said Georges.

He ordered the carriage to drive to the house in Kensington, and he went in with Sarah. Ten minutes later he came out. He stopped on the doorstep for a moment to speak to the manservant.

“Mrs. Longfellow is rather upset,” he said. “I’m a doctor, and I can see she’s under a great strain. I suggest you leave her alone for now and don’t disturb her. In case you should want me, here’s my address.”

He gave the servant his card, and went home.

At seven o’clock that evening an Inspector Hathaway was shown into his study.

“What can I do for you, Inspector,” asked Georges when the inspector was seated.

“You know a Mrs. Longfellow, I understand, sir.”

“I do,” said Georges. “I saw her today.”

“How was she when you left her?”

“She was distressed, Inspector. You see her husband has disappeared, she’s been very worried.”

“Have you any idea what could have happened to her husband?”

“Well, Mrs. Longfellow suspected he might have run away. Confidentially, Inspector, she told me that he had hinted he might leave her.”

“How much would you say it would affect her?”

“As I said, she was very upset. If it were found that he had in fact run away, I don’t think she would be able to stand it.”

“You mean she might have a breakdown?”

“Or worse, Inspector. Her whole life was wrapped up in her husband, without him she would have nothing to live for.”

“I see,” said the Inspector, getting to his feet. “Thank you very much for telling me.”

“May I know the reason for you wanting to know?”

“I don’t see why not, Doctor. Mrs. Longfellow committed suicide this afternoon.”

An expression of horror flittered across Georges' good-looking face.

"How terrible," he said. "How did she do it?"

"She hanged herself from the curtain rail in the library."

Georges sat down weakly.

"This is a great shock, Inspector. If only I'd realized she was that upset I should never have left her. I blame myself."

"There's no cause to that, sir, no cause at all. Actually we're not over surprised that this happened. She called into the Kensington police station today inquiring about her husband. By all accounts she was in a very distressed condition."

He moved towards the door.

"Thank you again, Doctor, I'm sorry to have taken up your time."

Georges accompanied him to the study door. After he had gone Georges came back to his desk. He opened the centre drawer and from it he took the envelope containing the five thousand pounds, the envelope he had taken from Sarah's handbag as he had watched the life being choked out of her at the end of a length of curtain cord.

Two days later Ludwig arrived. Georges showed him two uter-parathyroids and told him to take his pick.

"Why two, Georges? You are joking with me, I think."

Georges laughed.

"Yes, I am. But I'd like you to use this one," he said, handing Ludwig a bottle holding one of the small glands.

Ludwig shrugged. "It makes no difference," he said. "The only thing that matters is that they both come from males."

"They did," said Georges.

The following day the operation was performed. And two days after that Dr. George Braun disappeared from London, leaving a number of people worrying about him. But eventually they ceased to worry and except for a passing remark, 'I wonder what ever happened to Dr. Braun', his name and personality faded from the London scene.

His life in Paris was similar to what it had always been. The pattern was unchanged. In a year he had consolidated his position as a successful practitioner and had become accepted in the better homes of the city. Again designing mothers cast their nets but, as before Georges managed to enjoy the company of their daughters without becoming involved.

And then Georges suddenly began to feel old. It wasn't the age of the body, for he remained as before, but age of spirit. His mind, while still retaining all its sharpness and clarity of thought, became heavy

with an undefinable weariness. What was to become of him, was he fated to live out his existence for all time, never to know the final great rest? He considered for a time contacting Ludwig and telling the old man that he didn't want to go on. Then he thought of what awaited him should he fail to enter the next ten-year cycle. All the years that he had avoided, all the sickness that he had escaped would enter into his body in one moment. He would die, and he would die quickly, there was no doubt there. Although death would be admitted into a body racked with agony, the time of suffering would not be long. But the after-death was what disturbed him. Hadn't he tampered with the progression of life, entered a field which was God's by divine right. He had set himself up in competition with God, and this being the case what would be his judgement. He decided eventually that his only salvation lay on earth, he had the power to remain among the living, and this he would have to do. There would be no rest for him beyond the grave.

And his existence became a state of suspension in time. Things and events would occur and sweep past him leaving him the same as before. It was as though he had suddenly stopped while everything else in the world progressed in its accustomed manner.

Then he met Janine. He had gone to Italy because the weather in Paris had been foul. He wanted to see the sun again. He had met Janine who was staying at the same hotel and he had been impressed by her beauty. It followed naturally that he should ask her to pose for him while he did some sketches which he would later use in a statue. It followed naturally too that he should make love to her. He had come to accept the fact that he made love to his models as a part of the pattern. What happened after that he was neither prepared for, nor did he know how to deal with it.

He fell in love. With three lifetimes of experience behind him he found himself feeling like a lovesick adolescent. His women until now had been passing affairs used to satisfy his sexual appetites, but with Janine it was different. The physical was important but for the first time, it wasn't the absolute. There was something deeper in his feelings, far deeper. The existence which until now had wearied him became something joyous and he awoke each day with a pleasurable feeling of anticipation.

They laughed together, made love, spent all their time in each other's company and he was thirty-five again in spirit, as well as in body. The eventual outcome he pushed to the back of his mind. It was a problem that could be dealt with when the time came. But finally he was forced to bring the problem out and examine it. What if he should marry Janine? For five years all would be well, then she would start to notice things. She would have become five years older, he would still

be the same. What would he tell her, how would he explain? Then there was the difficulty caused by having to move on each ten years, this too would have to be explained.

There was no answer, he decided eventually. He would have to tell Janine that their affair must end. But he couldn't muster the courage to say what he knew would break her heart, and his too. He took the coward's way out, and one evening he left the hotel without telling her that he was going. He prayed that after the hurt had worn off Janine would think so little of him that she would not attempt to contact him.

He returned to Paris and threw himself into an orgy of work. He took up with Margo Philippe, and became involved in a violent affair, word of which he hoped would reach Janine so as to make it easier for her to decide not to see him.

Then came the time for Ludwig to arrive. He knew once this was past he could disappear and he need never fear Janine would find him again, to open up the old wounds. As before, he prepared for Ludwig's arrival, obtaining a uter-parathyroid, and subjecting it to treatment to revitalize it. But Ludwig didn't come. One week, two, then three weeks passed and still there was no word from Ludwig. He was past the time for the operation now, and was taking the fluid, the effects of which he so dreaded. But it was all that kept him alive. Then one day he noticed that the uter-parathyroid he had obtained had shrivelled up. It had not withstood the time delay. It was on a Saturday evening that he made this discovery. The hospitals were closed, as were the state-controlled mortuaries. But he had to find another uter-parathyroid immediately. Ludwig might arrive the following day and the operation would have to be performed as soon as possible.

He took a surgical bag and went out into the Paris streets. As it grew dark he found himself in a park on the edge of a lake. The fog was creeping up, enfolding everything in anonymity. Georges waited in the shadow of a clump of trees, listening to the footsteps that approached him along the path. Three times he was about to step out into the path, but on each occasion he ducked back into the bushes at the last moment as he noticed the persons walking towards him were unsuitable for his purpose. On two occasions it was couples, and the third time it was a solitary female. Then the fourth time he heard the footsteps he was successful. He listened as the steps came hurrying towards him. They were short steps made by someone who was late for an appointment and was trying to regain some time. He stepped from the trees at the last moment, and the approaching man stopped, startled. He was a little man, and he moved with sharp little movements. As he recovered from the shock Georges had given him, he shuffled to one side to pass Georges, with an angry little shrug. He

didn't even see Georges' hand reach out. The first thing he was conscious of was when Georges' fingers closed around his throat, cutting off all sound. Georges dragged him through to the bushes that bordered the lake. There he slit the man's clothes open beneath the breast bone. It was the work of a moment to make an incision in the still living flesh and remove the uter-parathyroid. He placed the gland in a small jar, returned the jar and scalpel to his bag, then stood up. A push with his foot, and the little man started to roll down the short incline to the lake. The waters closed over him without a sound.

Georges moved out into the path and started walking in the direction of the park gates. He walked quickly, his head down, his coat collar turned up around his ears. He failed to see the prostitute until he bumped into her. Then he moved round her angrily and continued on his way.

At home he transferred the uter-parathyroid into a flask. He took the prescribed dose of the deathly fluid, and went to bed. His last coherent thought before he slept was to pray that Ludwig would arrive the following day.

Ludwig didn't arrive the following day, and that evening he had a bad shock. Janine came to his reception.

The following day Ludwig arrived.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Ludwig was still in the laboratory when Georges came down at midnight. The old man looked up as Georges came in.

“Ludwig, I thought you had gone to bed hours ago.”

“I am not tired,” said Ludwig.

“You must be all right for tomorrow, don’t forget you’ve got to explain the operation to Gerrard.”

“I will be all right, you don’t have to worry.”

Georges looked at Ludwig for a moment then he moved over to the metal cupboard, taking a key from his pocket.

“It is time for the fluid?” asked Ludwig.

“Nearly,” said Georges. “Then tomorrow, no more.”

Georges unlocked the cupboard, then before he opened the safe he turned to Ludwig.

“You are upset, Ludwig, I wish you’d tell me why.”

“You don’t know, Georges?”

“No, I don’t, otherwise I wouldn’t ask you.”

“I will tell you what upsets me, Georges. It is the matter of this girl . . . no, no, do not shrug your shoulders as if it is something of no importance. I know, Georges, I know you very well. Ten years ago in London when I came to do the operation a woman you had been modelling had just committed suicide. It was supposed to be because her husband had left her. That’s what the police said, and that’s what you told me. I believed you then . . .”

“What do you mean, you believed me then,” said Georges.

“I have not finished, Georges. Ten years before that, in San Francisco, there was another girl. You had been modelling her too. She disappeared and was never found. I was in San Francisco many years later, I learned that she was presumed to be dead. Two deaths, Georges, both ladies who you were modelling. Perhaps these two could be coincidence. This is what I managed to convince myself it was, because that is what I wanted to believe. But now, Georges, I know this is not so. This third girl who has disappeared . . . this is not coincidence.”

“Then what is it?” said Georges.

“I want you to tell me. Don’t you trust me any more, Georges?”

“Of course I trust you, and if there was anything to tell you I would.

You must know that.”

“I used to know it, but not now.”

“Ludwig, I cannot understand you. Because a silly young girl takes it into her head to run away, and that’s all that I think it is, you are prepared to betray a lifetime of trust that stands between us.”

“I do not betray it, Georges, you do. Tell me about this.”

He pointed to the jar where the uter-parathyroid for tomorrow’s operation was laying, covered in a colourless preserving fluid.

“Tell you about it? Tell you what?”

“Where did it come from?”

“From the hospital, same as all the others.”

“See how you betray the trust, Georges. You are lying. If you lie about this why not about those women.”

“What do you mean, I’m lying?”

Ludwig suddenly smashed his open hand down on the top of the bench.

“Lying, lying, lying,” he shouted. “Do you think I do not know this gland was taken from a living body?”

“Nonsense,” said Georges.

“Don’t tell me ‘nonsense’ like that, Georges. I am not such a senile old fool that I have forgotten the difference between a re-vitalized and a living organ. This gland was removed from a living body.”

Georges looked at Ludwig steadily for a moment. He had never seen the old man so angry.

“All right, Ludwig,” he said finally. “As you say, it was taken from a living body. But listen to me, it was because of you that I had to do it, it was your fault.”

“Now it is my turn to say nonsense,” said Ludwig.

“You were due here three weeks ago,” said Georges. “As always I had the uter-parathyroid re-vitalized, waiting for the exchange. As always I obtained it while I was doing a post-mortem. It was all ready, everything was ready. It only needed you to arrive and it would have been as before. But you didn’t arrive, Ludwig. You didn’t arrive. I kept that gland re-vitalized and ready for three weeks, three whole weeks. Then it died. It just died like I would if you hadn’t arrived when you did. I didn’t have access to any more cadavers yet I had to obtain another gland. This was the only answer.”

“The answer for whom? For you or for the poor man you murdered?” He shook his head.

“I’m sorry, Georges, I cannot see how this can be justified.”

“You would rather I said to you I was unable to obtain a uter-

parathyroid and that this was the finish. Is that what you would have liked?"

"Yes, it is."

"Knowing what would happen to me, you still say that?" said Georges.

"What will happen to you, Georges? You will die. Is that such a terrible thing? I do not fear death as you do. If I did I would have come with you from the start. I too could have remained young. Remember how we talked about it, how you tried to persuade me? But what is death that it should be feared so much? Everything must have an end, there is no infinite on earth. Life everlasting holds no temptation for me. But because of your fear of death you have committed this terrible crime. Did it not occur to you that this unfortunate man might also have feared death?"

"You don't know what you are saying, Ludwig," said Georges.

"Of course I know what I am saying. Why should the death of this other man be of less importance than your own death. By what right do you decide such a thing. This is a thing that only God can decide. Are you God all of a sudden to judge that you are more important than the other man?"

"Of course I am more important," said Georges, his anger beginning to rise. "He was nothing, nothing at all, a nonentity."

"He had as much right to life as you, my friend. More perhaps, he had not attempted to meddle with the progression of life."

"While you are on this pedestal of moral indignation please remember that you are as involved as I am. It is your theory that was put into practice in me. You made me as I am."

"I do not forget it, that is why I am so sad. But I am sad for you, Georges. You have changed so much."

"I'll tell you why I have changed," said Georges. "There is nothing in this life that goes on and on, nothing that is enduring or permanent. There is the terrible loneliness, every few years having to sever all contacts, cut all traces, disappear and start a new cycle of nothing."

"You knew this would be the case when you set out seventy years ago."

"We were young then, we didn't realize the full ramifications."

"You could have stopped at any time. At forty-five, fifty-five, any time you chose. You could have stopped and then continued your life normally for your allotted span."

"What I could have done and what I did are poles apart. But while you are condemning me so heartily try and think for one moment of my loneliness. It's a loneliness that gets worse all the time. Sometimes

it becomes a physical pain.”

Ludwig looked at him steadily for a moment.

“We have come to the time, Georges,” he said, “when we must decide with great care whether what we are doing should continue.”

Georges started to say something but Ludwig held up his hand.

“No, let me say what I have to. Always I have worried about what you are now saying. No man can be alone all his life, it is not natural, it rebels against human nature. But as long as you continue, you *must* remain alone. This is something that I realized at the beginning and I hoped that you had realized it too. Now it appears that the ultimate has been reached. You cannot stand to be alone any longer, yet you cannot continue if you are not to be alone. It is as simple as that.”

“There is one solution, Ludwig. So simple I’m surprised we haven’t thought of it before.”

“To stop where we are?”

“No, to continue, but to arrange that I should not have to continue alone.”

“I’m sorry, Georges, I do not understand you.”

“There has never been any reason, physical reason, that this operation cannot be performed on a woman.”

An expression of horror came into Ludwig’s face.

“No, Georges, you cannot be serious.”

“Of course I am serious. Don’t you think I haven’t thought about it? It must be the answer.”

“But, Georges, what you are suggesting is . . . it’s monstrous.”

“Why? Is it so monstrous that I should want to make someone I love as I am. So that I can be with this person always. Is that monstrous?”

“Mademoiselle Janine, it is her you talk about?”

“It is.”

“And you say that you love her.”

“I know I do. I love her very much.”

“This I cannot believe, or you would not be contemplating such a terrible move.”

“Terrible! Monstrous! What sort of words are these. I am in love, Ludwig, for the first time in my life I have met someone who means more to me than I do myself.”

“Then forget her. You will be leaving Paris in a few days, forget her.”

“I cannot forget her, Ludwig.”

Ludwig climbed down from his stool.

“No, Georges, I will not hear of it. And I ask you to promise me that you will not consider it again yourself.”

“I cannot promise that, Ludwig, I’m sorry.”

“Then you are really alone now, for I will have nothing more to do with it.”

The two men looked at one another for a moment then Georges pulled himself together. He glanced at his watch and moved over to the open cupboard. He took a key from his pocket and put it in the lock of the safe.

“What are you doing?” asked Ludwig.

“The fluid, it is past the time already.”

Then before Georges could turn the key Ludwig moved across to him and reaching over he pulled the key from the lock.

“I cannot let you do it, Georges,” he said sadly.

Georges looked up at him from his kneeling position on the floor.

“Don’t be stupid, Ludwig. Give me that key.”

Ludwig shook his head slowly. Georges glanced at his watch again and stood up.

“The key, Ludwig. I told you it is past time.”

“It is, Georges. It is many years past time.” He put the key into his pocket and turned for the door.

Georges stood for a moment, not knowing what to do. As Ludwig reached the door, he spoke.

“All right, Ludwig, I’ll do as you say.”

Ludwig turned and looked at him.

“You’ll give up this idea of making Mademoiselle Janine as you are?”

“If you say so, Ludwig.”

Ludwig looked at him for a moment, then came back into the room taking the key from his pocket. Then some sixth sense made him pause.

“What’s the matter?” said Georges.

“I don’t believe you, Georges,” said Ludwig. “I’m sorry but I just don’t believe what you are saying.”

“Give me that key,” said Georges. He lunged forward and before Ludwig could back away Georges had grabbed the key. He turned to the safe, but before he could put the key in the lock Ludwig jumped at him. It needed only a sweep of his arm to send the old man rocking back against the wall. Then Georges turned to the safe and unlocked it. Immediately the room was bathed in the unearthly green luminescence held captive in the safe. Georges reached in and pulled

the flask from the safe. He set it on the bench and looked round for a beaker. When he turned back, Ludwig was holding the flask.

“You shan’t have it, Georges . . . you shan’t have it.”

Georges looked at the backs of his hands quickly, already there was a faint glowing beginning to shine through the skin. He looked up at Ludwig.

“I haven’t got much longer, Ludwig.” He took a step forward and Ludwig backed away lifting the flask aloft.

“Don’t come any nearer, Georges, or I shall break the flask.” Georges stopped.

“Ludwig, please, you know what will happen to me.”

“Yes, I know, and it still makes no difference. I love you dearly, Georges, you should know that, but what we once started full of bright shining ideals has been allowed to run amok. You have killed a man, and heaven only knows what has happened to that poor girl. Apart from the normal moral implications, what you have done goes directly against what I thought were our ideals, our aims. It is better that it end here, before further damage is done.”

He looked at Georges.

“Already the end is in sight, Georges, the transformation of your body has started.”

Georges looked down at the back of his hands again. The bone structure was clearly visible now. From where Ludwig was standing Georges looked like a living and breathing skeleton. His eyes, great pools of light beamed out from a grinning skull that seemed to mock Ludwig. Even Ludwig backed away in horror of what was before him. Georges realized that if he was going to save himself he would have to move now. He suddenly jumped at Ludwig. But the old man was too quick for him. He stepped back a pace and pulled the flask out of Georges’ reach. The backward swing of his arm carried the flask back on to the corner of the bench. There was a tinkle of broken glass and both men found themselves staring at the floor where the precious fluid formed an uneven puddle of light amid the shattered pieces of glass.

Georges was the first to move. He uttered an animal scream of rage and reached out for Ludwig. Before the old man could move away one of Georges’ hands closed around his throat. Ludwig’s eyes glazed with pain and there was a dreadful sizzle as the flesh beneath Georges’ hand started to burn. In a moment the old man was unconscious with pain. Still Georges did not slacken his grip. He allowed Ludwig to fall to the floor and he continued to exert pressure on his throat.

A minute later he climbed to his feet slowly, looking down at

Ludwig. Then, as though he suddenly remembered, he turned to the shattered flask on the floor. Probing carefully he managed to find a saucer shaped fragment which still contained some of the liquid. He picked it up and poured the liquid into the beaker. Then he swallowed half the contents of the beaker in one draught. He put the beaker down and moved over to the mirror behind the door.

He stood and watched while the liquid took effect, killing the light in his bones and slowly returning him to normal. Only when he was completely normal again did he turn to the body which lay on the floor.

Ludwig was obviously dead, and there was a deep, livid burn scar where Georges' hand had gripped his neck.

Georges stood looking down at Ludwig for a long time. Finally he went down on one knee and straightened the old man's head as though to make him more comfortable.

"Why couldn't you understand, Ludwig?" he said softly. "Why couldn't you understand?"

It took Georges a long time to dispose of the body of Ludwig. When he left the laboratory finally, grey fingers of dawn were already beginning to streak the sky.

For Pierre Gerrard the day started early. He was in his study at eight with books spread out in front of him on his desk. There wasn't much known about the uter-parathyroid gland, and what there was seemed all to stem back to Ludwig Weisz. Weisz said this, Weisz proved that. A paper by Weisz. The report of a lecture given by Weisz. There was no doubt that the old man was the pioneer and leader in the field of glandular research. Since he had retired some ten years earlier very little work had been done in this field. This was possibly because Weisz had covered it pretty thoroughly and there just wasn't anything more worth discovering on the properties and functions of the glands.

But still Pierre felt uneasy. He had thought about the impending operation all night, getting very little sleep in the process. The more he had thought about it the more he regretted that he had agreed to perform it. It wasn't that there could be any danger attached to it, otherwise Ludwig Weisz would not have been so persuasive. But it was the fact that the operation seemed so utterly pointless that worried him. Why should Bonner want to have his uter-parathyroid removed and replaced with another. And where was this other gland to come from. Pierre knew that once a gland was removed from a body it died. Ludwig had told him of no rejuvenation process, so what use was a dead gland going to be to Bonner.

Mixed with his natural reluctance to perform the operation was a

feeling he tried to suppress. But try as he may it kept coming to the fore. He didn't like Bonner. There was no escaping the fact that he was jealous of him. Obviously Janine felt very strongly towards him and for that reason alone how could Pierre be expected to like him. But added to that there was something else, something that was difficult to put into words. It built up to a general distrust of the man. There was that business about the statue of the Philippe girl, the one Bonner had lied to the police about. Bonner's excuse for lying to Inspector Legris had seemed adequate at the time, but on re-examination it rang false. And there was the disappearance of the girl herself. Pierre had noticed at the reception how she had looked at Georges. Obviously she had been very much in love with him, and just as obviously Bonner was in love with Janine. Pierre had known as soon as Janine had returned from Italy that something had been troubling her. He even asked her what it was, but she had denied she was worried and he had considered it expedient to drop the matter. If then Bonner was in love with Janine, why had he left her in Italy, for that was obviously what he had done, and why had he seemed reluctant to renew the acquaintance at first, yet eventually accepted the fact with such grace? The previous evening at the dinner party he and Janine seemed to have come to some understanding which excluded everyone else, including Pierre himself and Ludwig.

The whole affair was shrouded in unexplained facts, that defied analysis, and it was with this feeling of uneasiness that Pierre arrived at Georges' house to perform the operation. He was shown into the study by Roget, and told that Doctor Bonner would be down in a moment. He sat waiting for Bonner uneasily, nervously holding his doctor's bag on his knee.

Georges came in two minutes later. He was wearing a dressing gown and his shirt and trousers, and his shirt was unbuttoned at the throat. He smiled at Pierre and held out his hand.

“Good morning Doctor Gerrard. It is good of you to be on time.”

Pierre stood up.

“Where's Professor Weisz?”

There was a moment's hesitation before Georges answered.

“He's not here,” he said.

“I don't understand,” said Pierre.

“I'm afraid he had to leave late last night. He received an urgent message from his home in Vienna. He asked me to apologize on his behalf and to say that he knows that you will be perfectly capable of performing the operation on your own.”

“On my own.”

“Of course, it’s a perfectly simple operation, as I believe he explained.”

“The technicalities are simple I agree, but that is hardly the point.”

“What is the point then?”

“I agreed to do this operation under personal guidance and approval of the Professor. Without his lending his name to it I’m afraid I couldn’t operate.”

“Why on earth not?”

“He told me the operation was part of a series of experiments he was engaged on, with your assistance. He would tell me no more. How do I know what has gone before, what affect this operation might have on you? You might die if I operate, I can’t tell.”

“I will most surely die if you don’t.”

“I find that hard to believe. You look perfectly healthy to me.”

“I am healthy, and I shall remain so provided the uter-parathyroid is replaced.”

“Then you must find someone else to replace it. I will not operate.”

“But you agreed last night.”

“Last night Professor Ludwig Weisz was here. His name and reputation are such that under his patronage I would have performed the operation. Without him I cannot. There’s nothing more to be said.”

He started towards the door.

“One moment Doctor Gerrard. I’ll pay you well.”

“That is of no consequence,” said Pierre. Then before he walked out he looked at Georges again.

“Let me say this, Bonner,” he said. “If you are in the critical condition that you say you are, I advise you to go to a reputable hospital immediately. Perhaps they will do for you what I cannot.”

Before Georges could say anything further, Pierre was gone and the study door closed behind him. Georges thought for a moment of running after him, begging him if necessary to perform the operation. But he realised almost immediately that there was nothing he could do that would change Pierre’s mind. The only solution was to find another doctor, and find him soon. He had enough of the fluid left for two more small doses. Enough to keep him alive for twelve more hours. During that time he was going to have to find a doctor and convince that doctor that the operation was legitimate. Without the professional name of Ludwig Weisz to inspire confidence, it was not going to be easy. He rang the bell for Roget and when the servant came to the door of the study Georges told him to get a list of all the practising surgeons within a mile radius of the Rue Noir. While Roget was getting the list Georges went up to his bedroom and finished

dressing.

Back in the laboratory he measured himself a dose of the precious fluid and swallowed it. Then armed with Roget's list he started his visits to the surgeons. It was a long list, but when he had removed the names of the men he knew personally it was reduced by more than half. To have called on any of his compatriots would have opened the way to more complications, and that was something he hadn't the time to deal with. The first address on the list was that of a Doctor Novak, and Georges decided to go there first.

Inspector Legris had arrived at his office that morning with an extremely bad temper. The affair of the missing girl coming on top of the murder of the little man had served to put him off his stride, and he found himself thinking about both cases when his training told him he should be thinking about one. His facts started to become confused and he found himself thinking about Doctor Bonner in relation to the murdered man instead of in relation to the girl. It was only after he had been turning over the Bonner interview in his mind for fifteen minutes that he realized Bonner was to do with the Margo Philippe case, and not the murder. Then to add to his troubles his sergeant brought in an immense pile of files, covered with dust and faded around the edges with time. His sergeant put the files on the desk in front of Legris and stood back with the air of a man who had done a good job of work.

“What's this?” roared Legris.

“They're files Monsieur L'Inspecteur,” said the Sergeant.

“I can see that, idiot, but what's in them?”

“The chief wants you to go through them and close down the ones that are finished.”

“He wants what?” shouted Legris.

“He wants you to go through them and . . .”

“I heard you. What are they?”

“I'm sure I don't know, sir.”

“Well find out,” said Legris shortly.

The sergeant picked up the files from the desk and carried them to the table in the corner of the office. He opened the first and looked at it. It was headed. “Report from the Police Department, San Francisco,” and it was dated twenty years earlier.

“They're old sir,” said the sergeant. “The first one's twenty years old.”

“Throw it away,” said Legris.

The sergeant looked at Legris for a moment. Obviously the Inspector

was in a foul mood. If he threw the file away and later there were repercussions, the Inspector would blame him. He lifted the file from the top and put it to one side. Then he wondered suddenly why they should have a file from the San Francisco Police Department. He opened it and read it briefly.

“Funny thing, sir,” he said eventually. “This file is about a missing woman, too.”

“Which file?” said Legris.

“This one you asked me to throw away.”

“Why didn’t you throw it away?”

“I was going to sir, I was just reading it first. There was a doctor involved in this case, too.”

“What case?”

“The one I’m telling you about, a girl disappeared, the police wanted to find a doctor to question him.”

“When was all this?”

“Twenty years ago in San Francisco.”

“Throw it away sergeant.”

“This Doctor Bonner you went to see last night, didn’t you say he was a sculptor, too?”

“What of it?”

“Nothing sir, it’s just funny like I said. Here we are working on a case, and we’re handed a twenty year old file which is almost exactly the same.”

“Women disappear every day.”

“I know, but this one was connected with a doctor who was also a sculptor.”

For the first time Legris sat up and took notice. He saw his sergeant about to deposit the file in the waste paper basket.

“What are you doing with that file?” he said.

“I’m throwing it away sir.”

“Don’t you know never to throw old records away until they’ve been thoroughly checked? Give it to me.”

The sergeant brought the file across to Legris’ desk and laid it in front of him. Legris opened it and started to read.

It was a short entry, the entire information contained on one sheet of paper. A Miss Avril Barnes of San Francisco had disappeared. At the same time a doctor who she had been very friendly with and who was doing a statue of her, disappeared also. The file ended with a request from the San Francisco police for the French police to watch for the girl and for the doctor, in case they had come to France. There

followed a description of the girl and a description of the doctor. Legris read the file twice, then he re-read the description of the doctor. About thirty-five years old, tall, fair, handsome. Finally he looked up at his sergeant who was going through the other files.

“The date on this file, sergeant,” he said. “There couldn’t be a mistake I suppose?”

“I doubt it sir.”

“What are those others?”

“They’re all reports from other countries sir, like the one you have there. I think the Chief was having a clear out in his office.”

“Any other missing women?”

“No sir, they’re mostly murderers and the like, there’s one missing husband though.”

“Not interested unless he was being sculpted,” said Legris.

The sergeant smiled.

“No sir, he wasn’t.” He was about to put the file to one side when he stopped.

“His wife was sir?” he said finally.

“Was what?”

“Being sculpted. The wife of Longfellow was posing for a . . .”

“Give me the file,” said Legris.

Again the entry was short. It was from the London police, would the French police keep a look out for a Henry Longfellow wanted in connection with the apparent suicide of his wife Sarah? Mrs. Longfellow had hanged herself, the body having been identified subsequently by Doctor George Braun, a friend of the deceased who was at the time engaged in modelling a statue of her. The date on the file was ten years ago.

Legris read it again, then he read the American file once more. Then he sat back and scratched his head.

“I don’t believe it,” he said finally.

“Sir?” said the sergeant politely.

“Never mind,” he said. “Check through those files carefully. Find out if there’s anything else involving a doctor who is also a sculptor. Then go downstairs to records and do the same thing there.”

The sergeant looked dismayed.

“That’ll take a long time Sir.”

“So it will take a long time,” said Legris. “If anyone wants me I’m out.”

He gathered the two files together and stamped out of the office.

Pierre Gerrard saw him as soon as he was announced. Legris came into Pierre's consulting room and took the proffered chair.

"I hope you'll forgive this intrusion," he said.

"Of course, Inspector," said Pierre. "Are you here in your official capacity or as a prospective client?"

"This is official sir, there're one or two questions I'd like to ask you."

"Go ahead Inspector."

"It's rather difficult for me sir, I don't know quite how to start."

"Try the beginning, it helps sometimes."

"Quite. Are you a particular friend of Doctor Georges Bonner?"

Pierre looked up at him quickly.

"Why do you ask?"

"Are you, sir?"

"No I'm not. I only met him for the first time two or three days ago."

Legris looked disappointed.

"There's not much you can tell me about him them?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Last night sir, when I called, I received the impression that you wanted to say something."

"That's right. I don't see the harm in telling you, Inspector. You remember you asked to see the statue he had done of that missing woman?"

"Margo Philippe."

"That's right. Well he told you he'd smashed it. He hadn't, I'd seen it ten minutes before in his laboratory."

"That's strange," said Legris. "I wonder why he did that."

"I take it that you haven't found the girl yet," said Pierre.

"No sir, we haven't."

"And you think Bonner may know something that could help you?"

"I don't know what to think sir, since this morning the affair has gone completely beyond my powers of reasoning."

Pierre smiled.

"You seem a sane and sober sort of man, Inspector, I shouldn't think you often made such an admission."

"How old would you think Bonner is, sir?" asked Legris.

"About thirty-five."

"That's what I would have said."

“Why do you ask Inspector?”

“Look sir,” said Legris frankly. “I need some help and I don’t mind admitting it.”

“To find this girl?”

“It goes deeper than that sir, far deeper I’m afraid. I’m going to tell you something, when I’m finished perhaps you’ll be able to provide the help I need.”

“Go ahead, Inspector,” said Pierre interested.

“As you may know sir, the police forces of various countries keep in touch with one another to some extent. A criminal may commit a crime in, say, Berlin, then flee to Paris. Eventually the Paris police receive particulars of the crime and we are asked to keep a look out for the criminal in question. Sometimes we manage to apprehend the man, and then we return him to the place where he committed the crime, there to stand trial. It’s a reciprocal arrangement you see, sometimes we get men who are wanted by us turning up in, say, London. If the London police have the particulars they arrest him and send him back to us.”

“Doesn’t leave the poor criminal much chance Inspector, does it,” said Pierre.

“That’s our aim, sir. Now ten years ago almost exactly, a woman committed suicide in London. At least suicide was assumed, and the police wanted to interview her husband who disappeared at the same time. Nothing very strange here you’ll say, the woman probably took her life when her husband ran away. It has been known. Exactly ten years before that a young woman in San Francisco disappeared completely. Her parents were important people, they made no end of a fuss, but she was never seen again. Now we come up to date and we have a young woman, Miss Philippe disappearing completely. All right, so there we have three completely unconnected cases, happening ten years apart and at opposite sides of the globe. It was only this morning that I learned about these other two cases, and at the same time I learned of a common denominator, however far fetched it may sound. In each case the woman in question had been posing for a statue immediately prior to her disappearance. In each case the sculptor had been a doctor, who in the two earlier cases disappeared shortly after the discovery of the crime, if crime in fact there was. It’s not a very common combination, sculptor and doctor, and I came to the opinion that coincidence was being stretched too far. You see what I’m getting at, don’t you, sir?”

“I see what you’re trying to get at, Inspector, but you realize you’re not making much sense, I suppose.”

“The dates have you worried, haven’t they Doctor Gerrard?”

"If Bonner is the man you think he is he would have been less than fifteen years old at the time of the San Francisco incident."

"That's right, and the report from San Francisco says the doctor in question was thirty-five."

"So if it were Bonner he'd be fifty-five now."

"That's right, sir, and that's where my reasoning capabilities desert me, I'm afraid. You said yourself he was only thirty-five, certainly not more than thirty-eight."

There was a long silence, each man with his own thoughts. Finally Pierre spoke.

"I assume you haven't said anything to Bonner about this."

"What's the point?" said Legris.

"As you say what's the point. I'm sorry, Inspector, I fail to see how I can help you, much as I'd like to."

"You don't like Bonner?"

"As a matter of fact I don't but it's purely a personal matter."

He thought hard for a moment.

"Have you checked on Bonner's background?" he said finally.

"Briefly, sir. Everything is completely normal as far as I could trace back, then I seemed to come to a dead end."

"How far back before you reached the end?"

"Ten years," said Legris.

Pierre stood up and walked to the window. After a moment he turned towards Legris again.

"Look Inspector, I'll give you a lead. I don't know whether it'll come to anything, but you can try. See what you can find out about Professor Ludwig Weisz. You've heard of him, I suppose?"

"Vaguely. He's a doctor, isn't he?"

"He used to be one of the greatest. He was at Bonner's house last night. You saw him."

"I remember, a little old man with white hair."

"That's him. Try to find out if he was in London and San Francisco at the times you mentioned."

"You don't think that Professor Weisz could have been responsible?"

"Not directly, no."

"Would you care to enlarge on that, Doctor?"

"I can't at present, Inspector. But will you do as I say?"

Legris got to his feet slowly.

"Doctor, I'll do anything right now," he said tiredly. "Needless to say, you won't mention anything of this to anyone."

“If you say so, Inspector.”

As soon as Legris had gone Pierre went to his bookcase. He took down a book entitled THE REJUVENATION OF THE ENDOCRINE GLANDS by Ludwig Weisz. He took the book to his desk and opening it he started to read. As he read he made notes, and occasionally he fetched another text book from the bookcase and made cross checks on some of the information he was gathering. Finally after two hours he sat back and looked at his notes. Weisz had been sure, he said in his book, that certain endocrine glands were directly responsible for the ageing of the human body. He had gone no further than theory, but his writings contained an element of knowledge that seemed to assume the theories were as good as fact. As the leading authority on glands this element was accepted simply because nobody cared to dispute it. But say it wasn't just theory, thought Pierre. Say the old man had in fact put his theories into practice. He had told Pierre that he was unable to explain the full ramifications of the operation that Pierre had been expected to perform, and he had said that Pierre would be pioneering a field of medicine dreamed of but up to now never attempted.

Pierre sat for a long time looking at his notes. When his wandering thoughts returned, the room was almost dark. He rang for his servant to draw the curtains then told the man he was going out.

He walked round to Janine's house, and arrived as Janine was having tea with her mother and father. Always a welcome guest he was made to have tea with the family while they discussed trivialities. He managed to tell Janine that he wanted to speak to her privately, and after tea she politely steered her parents out of the living-room. Her parents were delighted to leave them alone, they liked Pierre and they hoped that Janine would eventually relent and agree to marry him.

Janine shut the door behind her mother and father and turned to Pierre with a smile.

“You look very serious, Pierre,” she said. “You're not going to propose again, are you?”

“If I thought it would do any good, I would,” said Pierre. “But it's Bonner I want to talk to you about.”

Janine's smile vanished.

“Georges?”

“Janine my dear, I don't want you to think I'm prying, or that I mind, but what exactly does Georges Bonner mean to you?”

Janine walked across to an arm-chair and sat down.

“Why do you want to know, Pierre?” she said.

“It’s difficult to explain, I have no proof, but—”

“Proof! Proof about what?”

“Let me finish, Janine,” said Pierre. “I have reason to believe that Bonner isn’t all that he appears to be. I can’t go into it further than that at the moment, but I want you to promise me that you won’t see him again, at least until I’ve had a little more time.”

“Time for what, Pierre?” said Janine, a hard edge creeping into her voice.

“All I’m trying to do is to warn you against Georges Bonner.”

“I gather that, but you haven’t explained why.”

“I can’t give you all the details until I’m sure of them myself, but the man is . . . well, he’s abnormal.”

“For heaven’s sake Pierre, try to talk sense.”

“Last night Professor Weisz asked me to perform an operation on Bonner. I agreed. Today Weisz isn’t there any more.”

“What’s so mysterious about that?”

“By itself nothing, but added to other things I’ve discovered . . .”

“But what, Pierre? What have you discovered?”

Pierre shrugged.

“All I can do is to ask you to wait until I can get more information.”

“Until you can spy on him some more, that’s what you mean, isn’t it? You came here determined to make some sort of an impression on me with a story about Georges. You’ve hinted at heaven knows what, but you’ve said nothing. You’ve made an impression on me, Pierre, but it’s about you and not about Georges that I’ve gained this impression. You’re jealous, you’re jealous about his work and about me. I wasn’t going to tell you this right now. I didn’t want to hurt you, but I’m in love with Georges, and I’m going to marry him.”

Pierre sat for a long moment saying nothing. Although he had suspected that Janine’s feelings for Georges were strong, it still came as a shock to hear the words from her own lips.

“If that’s all you came to see me about, Pierre, I suggest you go now. I’ll make your apologies to mother and father.”

Pierre pulled himself together. There was nothing more that he could do here. He got to his feet and followed Janine to the door. Neither of them said good-bye, and Pierre felt, as the front door closed behind him that a chapter in his life was finished. He thought for one moment about going to Janine’s parents and telling them what he knew. Then he decided that, in fact, he knew nothing and their reactions would probably have been similar to Janine’s. The affair had been shifted out of his hands, there was nothing to do now but wait.

Perhaps Legris would accomplish something, but as far as Pierre was concerned he was helpless in a situation which he still only half believed in himself.

The first doctor on Georges' list was Novak. Georges waited in the doctor's outer office for half an hour, then he was shown into Novak's surgery.

"Now Monsieur Angelo, what can I do for you?" said Novak, using the name Georges had given to his receptionist.

"I require a simple operation Doctor, that is all."

Novak smiled condescendingly.

"Suppose you tell me what's wrong and let me decide whether you need an operation."

"There's nothing wrong. I simply want you to remove my uter-parathyroid gland and replace it with a substitute."

Novak stopped smiling.

"What on earth for?"

"The reasons aren't important," said Georges.

"They most certainly are Monsieur," said Novak. "I assume you have a slight knowledge of medicine?"

"I have," said Georges.

"Then you will understand that what you are suggesting is completely out of the question."

"Why?" said Georges.

"It's just not possible. There are a number of reasons. Firstly . . ." and Novak stopped.

"Yes, Doctor," Georges prompted.

Novak thought hard for a moment. Not one objection came to his mind.

"It's just not possible," he said finally.

"You already said that, Doctor. I want to know why you consider it impossible. If I came in here and asked you to remove my arm or my leg, you'd do it."

"If I thought your arm or leg needed removing."

"Believe me, what I am asking is absolutely essential if I am to live."

"Come, Monsieur, you can't be serious. You might as well be saying remove my little finger or I shall die."

"If my little finger were gangrenous I should die."

"Quite. But you cannot tell me that your uter-parathyroid is gangrenous."

"I don't, but the parallel is similar, I must have this gland removed and another substituted today."

"Well I most certainly will not do it, Monsieur."

“But . . .” Georges started, but Novak held up his hand.

“No Monsieur, I’m sorry, there’s nothing more to be said. Now if you will excuse me, I’m a very busy man.”

Georges stood up slowly. He realised the futility of argument but he was loathe to admit defeat.

“Your fee would be large Doctor,” he said when he was standing.

“Not large enough, Monsieur,” said Novak. “Good day.”

Georges left Novak’s house and looked at the next name on the list that Roget had prepared for him. Doctor Bernstein, Rue Rivoli. It was five minutes’ walk, and during this five minutes Georges decided to try a different approach.

When he was shown into Bernstein’s office, he came in with his hand outstretched.

“It is such a pleasure to meet you at last, Doctor,” he said. Bernstein returned the handshake with a look of puzzled enquiry.

“You don’t know me of course,” said Georges. “But I know of you.”

“Nothing derogatory I trust?” said Bernstein with a smile.

“Would I be here if that were the case?” said Georges.

“Why are you here?” said Bernstein.

Georges sat down across from Bernstein’s desk. “I too am a doctor. My work is in Zurich, so you wouldn’t be expected to know about me. I have come to you Doctor Bernstein because I want the services of an expert surgeon. In Paris when one wants the best in surgery one comes to you.”

“I’m flattered,” said Bernstein.

“Never be flattered by the truth, Doctor,” said Georges.

“You still haven’t told me why you want a surgeon.”

“A year ago I started a series of experiments to do with glandular fevers. So confident was I with the results of my experiments that I used myself as a guinea pig. Now I find that my confidence was misplaced and I have suffered physical damage as a result.”

“Go on, Doctor,” said Bernstein, interested.

“I have damaged the uter-parathyroid beyond hope of saving,” said Georges. “My only chance now is for me to have it removed and replaced with another gland.”

Bernstein sat back in his chair, and placed the tips of his fingers together.

“May I ask you how you came to use yourself as a guinea pig?” he said.

“I told you, I assumed the process I had been working on was complete. I was wrong.”

“Most unfortunate,” said Bernstein.

“Will you help me, Doctor?” said Georges.

“I will on one condition. You let me have all your notes and the records of all your experiments.”

“Why should that be necessary?”

“This way I can judge what has gone before and whether in fact you are in need of an operation.”

“But I know I am, surely you don’t think I’d make a mistake like that.”

“You made the mistake before,” said Bernstein gently. “You’ll let me have the notes.”

“I can’t, they’re in Zurich.”

“Then I suggest you return to Zurich and fetch them.”

“There isn’t time, the operation must be done today.”

“Then I’m afraid I cannot do it, Doctor. Without the full records of the case you couldn’t expect me to operate.”

“But . . .”

“That is my final word on the subject, doctor. Good day to you.”

Two minutes later Georges was out on the street. He crossed the name of Bernstein off his list, and hailed a hansom.

It was seven o’clock when the servant showed him into the sitting room of Janine’s house. The servant told him that Janine was dressing and would be down in ten minutes. Georges looked terrible. He had spent the whole day visiting the doctors on his list, and each time he had come away defeated. There had been one man who had said he would do it, but Georges noticed that his hands were shaking violently, and there was a smell of stale whisky in the air. To have allowed a man like that to open him up would have been the same as committing suicide. Gradually the plan formulated as he went from doctor to doctor. At first it was the germ of an idea, then as it became more obvious that he was not going to be able to obtain assistance, the idea started to develop. Now he was waiting for Janine so that he could put the idea into action.

She came into the sitting room, a billowing cloud of white satin, and she moved straight into his arms. She kissed him hard, then stood away and looked at him.

“My darling, you look terrible. I’ve been so worried,” she said.

“Worried?”

“I tried to find you all afternoon. No one at the clinic knew where you were.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“Are you ill, Georges?”

“Of course not, why?”

“Pierre was here this afternoon, he said something about an operation.”

“That’s nothing for you to worry about, my darling,” said Georges.  
“Let me have a look at you. You look wonderful.”

“Thank you. I’m going to the opera.”

Georges looked disappointed suddenly.

“What is it, darling? You don’t mind do you?”

“I wanted this evening to be ours,” he said. “There’s something I want to show you.”

“Then I shall cancel my visit to the opera.”

“You don’t mind?”

“Of course not. I was only going with mother and father.”

She walked to the door.

“I’ll be ready in five minutes,” she said.

Five minutes later they left the house and Georges hailed a hansom. He gave the driver an address that Janine didn’t hear, then climbed in beside her.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“You’ll see,” said Georges, taking her hand. “Remember what you said the other night, about wanting to go with me on this journey.”

“I remember,” said Janine.

“Do you still mean it?”

She squeezed his hand.

“Of course I do, my darling.”

“Whatever is involved?”

“So long as I’m with you, that’s all that matters.”

“It’ll mean you’ll never see your parents again, your friends, not even Paris. Not for a long time anyway.”

“Are you trying to dissuade me, because if you are it’s quite useless.”

“I just wanted to be sure that you knew what you were doing,” said Georges. “Once we go, there’ll be no turning back.”

“I’m sure,” said Janine.

Georges leaned over and kissed her gently.

“My darling, I love you so much,” he said.

The hansom stopped at the entrance to a short street that led down the side of one of the main line stations. Georges helped Janine down and paid the driver. He stood watching while the hansom clopped away into the distance, then taking Janine's arm he turned and started down the narrow, ill lit street. Above and to one side Janine could hear the noise of the station, but here between the high, shuttered buildings sound became muted lending a strange feeling of unreality. Georges didn't speak, and two hundred yards down the street he stopped.

"Here we are," he said.

They were opposite a narrow doorway set into a wall which rose high above them, forming part of the station. Georges took a key from his pocket and unlocked the door.

"I'll go first, it's dark," he said.

He stepped through the doorway and Janine followed him. She stood waiting while she listened to Georges fumbling for a match. Then there was a flare of light and she saw Georges apply the match to a lamp standing on a wooden crate just inside the door. While Georges shut and relocked the door, she looked around her. They were in a low ceilinged passage, with stone walls that were running with moisture. The whole atmosphere was of neglect and decay.

As soon as Georges had relocked the door, he picked up the lamp and led the way across the chamber to another door at the far side. Here he took another key from his pocket and unlocked this door. Then holding the lamp high, he stood back and signalled for Janine to precede him through the door.

The room that Janine found herself in was very large. The door led on to a catwalk which finished in steps which led down to the floor of the room. Even on the catwalk, ten feet above floor level, the ceiling was ten feet above where Janine was standing. It was an arched ceiling, presumably forming part of the station above. The room itself was about forty feet by thirty, the walls and floor of stone. But all this was secondary to the purpose of the room. Scattered across the floor, stacked on shelves and boxes was the total output of Georges' sculpting.

There were close on four hundred statues, ranging from small busts, to life-sized full figures. They stood alone, they spilled out of half opened crates in a sea of straw, they packed the shelves around the room. They formed an overall picture of complete confusion, each piece of work unable to express its full beauty due to its companion pieces which clamoured for attention.

Janine stood for a long moment looking down into the room beneath her. Then she turned to Georges. She was wide-eyed and

slightly breathless with excitement.

“Georges, I . . . I don’t know what to say.”

Georges smiled at her.

“Don’t say anything,” he said “Just look.”

“May we go down?” she asked.

“Of course, but mind the stairs, they’re not very safe.”

They moved down the stairs to floor level, and here the impression of confusion was even greater. Janine moved quickly to one piece, then as she started to exclaim on it, her eye was taken by another. The same thing happened again, then again. Finally she turned to Georges.

“Georges, this is wonderful, all this work, it must have taken you a lifetime.”

“It has,” said Georges. He picked up a small animal figure and handed it to Janine.

“Look, the first thing I ever did. I was twelve years old at the time.” Janine took the figure from him, then carried it closer to the light that Georges had set on a packing case. It was the figure of a reclining deer, almost perfect in execution. She turned it over and looked at the base. Carved into the base was G. BONNER 1798. She looked at this for a moment working something out in her mind. Finally she spoke without looking up.

“You made a mistake in your dates Georges. If you were twelve years old when you did this, you’d be a hundred and four now.”

She turned to look at Georges with a smile on her face. But Georges wasn’t there. As she turned she heard the door at the top of the stairs close.

“Georges!” she called. She put the statue down and started up the stairs. When she reached the door she tried the handle but the door was locked. While she was still trying it she heard the sound of the outside door slamming shut, the echo booming back to her along the narrow passages.

At first she was bewildered. Perhaps Georges was playing a joke on her. But it wasn’t like him, and it wasn’t very funny. She moved back down to the floor of the room and stood looking around her. Stone eyes regarded her blankly, stone faces looked at her impassively, some laughing, some with features set in lines of pain or unhappiness. She walked back upstairs and tried the door again, more for something to do than with any real hope that it would open.

Then she sat on the top stair, rested her chin in her hands and tried to puzzle out what Georges thought he was doing.

At the end of the street running down the side of the railway, Georges

hailed a hansom and gave the driver the address of Pierre's house. He had many things to do in the next two or three hours and he told the driver to hurry. The sidewalk cafés of the Champs-Élysées were thronged with the early evening customers. Georges watched them idly through the window of his cab. "Ordinary people," he thought, "leading their same ordinary little lives. The life that starts in some distended womb and ends seventy or eighty years later in a cold wooden box. What do they accomplish in their time? What do they do that they can look back and say, I have left my mark on this earth? They do nothing. They feed themselves, they make love, they breed children to the same sort of life, then they leave without anything to show that they ever existed except for an epitaph carved in granite."

The cab stopped outside Pierre's house and Georges paid the driver. His knock was answered by a servant who asked him to wait. A moment later Pierre himself came to the door.

"What do you want, Bonner?" he said shortly.

"I want to talk to you."

Pierre hesitated for a moment, then he stood aside.

"Come in," he said.

Georges followed Pierre into the study and took the chair that Pierre waved him to.

"You'll make it short please, Bonner," he said. "I'm very busy."

"I can't promise to make it short, but I can promise that you'll be interested," said Georges.

"I'm listening," said Pierre.

Georges started by telling Pierre of the first time he had met Ludwig, omitting at this stage to mention any dates. He went on to tell him of their original experiments and the ultimate test whereby he had become the human guinea pig. Pierre stopped him at this stage.

"This transference of your uter-parathyroid is part of the experiment I take it. The continuation."

Georges nodded.

"Ludwig perfected everything except the means of obviating the need for the operation every decade."

"Before you go on, Bonner," said Pierre, "tell me one thing. How long ago was the first operation performed?"

"Seventy years," said Georges.

"How old were you then?"

"Thirty-five."

"So you're telling me that now you are one hundred and five years old."

Georges nodded.

“I don’t believe it,” said Pierre abruptly.

“Whether you believe it or not is no longer of any importance to me,” said Georges. “What is important is that you do this operation and you do it tonight.”

“My answer is still the same. No.”

“Why?”

“Because, as I said, I don’t believe you. If you were speaking the truth you would have published your findings years ago.”

“I’ll tell you why we haven’t published, shall I?” said Georges. “I think the enthusiasm of youth blinded us to the more practical aspects of our discovery. With time we became wiser. We didn’t publish because to do so would have brought disaster. The balance of nature is such that the population of the world is kept at a level where the world can adequately provide living space and food for her people. If it were suddenly made possible for people to remain alive and healthy indefinitely, then the whole structure of nature would collapse. Within a generation the population of the earth would be doubled, then quadrupled. There would be famine on a scale never before dreamed of. That is one reason why we never published our findings, the world is incapable of living with our discovery.”

“One reason?” said Pierre.

“The other is simple,” said Georges. “Every ten years it is necessary to have the uter-parathyroid replaced. To replace an organ one must first find a replacement. With no one dying there would be no replacements. Apart from that, during the latter stages of each ten years cycle it sometimes becomes necessary to postpone the operation. When this is the case there is a fluid that one can drink that enables one to keep alive for four weeks beyond the time the operation is due. The fluid has unpredictable effects upon the mental balance, and it would be unwise, catastrophic even, to allow it into the hands of people who did not know exactly what they were dealing with.”

“I assume by your urgency to have the operation performed that you have none of this fluid left,” said Pierre.

“Enough to keep me alive for another six hours.”

“What will happen then?”

“I shall become the inheritor of all my one hundred and four years, of all the sickness I have never had, of every sore, pain blemish, disease. A lifetime of illness in one moment. That is why you must perform the operation.”

There was a long pause. Finally Pierre looked up.

“I still cannot do it,” he said.

“Why not?”

“You are asking me to participate in something that is an offence against the balance of nature. You said so yourself. It is also an offence against God.” He shook his head. “I am sorry, Bonner. That is my last word on the subject, nothing will make me change my mind, nothing.”

Georges stood up slowly.

“I think I can make you change your mind. You’re in love with Janine, aren’t you,” he said.

“Yes, I am,” said Pierre.

“You wouldn’t like anything to happen to her, would you,” said Georges.

“What do you mean?”

“At this moment Janine is somewhere that only I know. If you perform the operation and perform it successfully, I shall release her. If you don’t perform the operation, or anything happens to me while you are operating, then she will never be seen by you or anyone else again.”

Before Pierre could say anything Georges moved to the door. There he turned back.

“You have two hours to verify the facts. Then I shall expect you at my house. Two hours, remember.”

Now Georges was really in a hurry. He knew that Pierre had no alternative but to accept the facts. Georges had to be ready to make his escape as soon as Pierre had performed the operation. But before he left Paris he had to see Janine was taken care of. This would involve an operation similar to his own, which he could perform easily. The first thing that was needed was a female uter-parathyroid. He went straight to the mortuary attached to the hospital close to the Rue Noire. It was an evil-smelling place, damp and redolent of the grave that was waiting for its occupants. The nightwatchman looked at Georges suspiciously until Georges slid a ten-franc coin in front of him. He pocketed the coin and sniffed loudly.

“What can I do for you, Monsieur?”

“Any recent arrivals?” asked Georges.

The watchman scratched his head.

“As a matter of fact we do ‘ave a new one. Came in an hour ago.”

“I’d like to look at her,” said Georges.

“It’s not an ‘er, it’s an ‘im,” said the watchman.

“Have you any female cadavers?” asked Georges.

"If you mean dead 'uns, no we ain't," said the watchman. "But a dead 'un's a dead 'un, male or female . . ." Then a crafty look came into his eye. ". . . depending on what you'd be wanting it for, I suppose," he added.

Georges looked at him steadily for a moment, until the man dropped his eyes and mumbled an apology.

"Begging your pardon, sir," he said.

When he looked up again Georges had gone. He fingered the coin in his pocket, scratched his head once more, and started on his rounds.

Georges stood undecided outside the mortuary for a moment. It was essential to his plans that he obtain a female uter-parathyroid, and he had no idea where he could obtain one in the time he had available. He looked at his watch. He had ninety minutes before he was due back at his home to meet Pierre.

Madeleine sat in the tavern and watched her companion swallow his fourth drink. She sighed gently to herself. Ever since that business with the police the other day, when she had been taken to the station and questioned by the man with the black beard, business had been very bad. She suspected that her competitors had passed the word to prospective clients that she was in trouble with the police. Clients didn't like trouble so they kept away. And now with her first customer today she had to get a man who wanted to get drunk before he came home with her. She looked at him distastefully as he shouted for another drink. He was fat, and extremely dirty. She was worried that he would drink himself to a state of incapability and thus deprive her of her sorely needed ten francs. Another drink was placed in front of the man and he tried to pinch the bottom of the girl who served it. At least that was a good sign, thought Madeleine. She pushed his drink towards him.

"Here you are, dear, drink it all up."

He looked at her belligerently.

"Whassahurry?" he said.

"No hurry at all. But I'm a working girl, you understand. Time is money after all," she said, beginning to get tired of the whole thing.

"You'll get paid, so stop nagging," he said, picking up his drink. Madeleine sat back and sighed gently to herself, then her eyes moved to the door which had just opened to admit a man.

That's the sort of customer I'd like, she thought. Young, good looking, and obviously well off. Trouble was, men like that could have their pick of girls, and they only came to Madeleine's sort if they were a little peculiar and wanted some strange performance. Madeleine

didn't mind some of the peculiarities, they could even be fun when they were talked about afterwards. But some of them she would have nothing to do with.

She watched idly as the good-looking man moved to a table inside the door, and sat down. She was still looking at him when she realized with a shock that he was looking at her. She looked behind her quickly to make sure she wasn't mistaken. When she looked back he was still staring at her. She licked her lips nervously and smiled. His expression didn't change but he nodded his head very slightly. So this is it, she thought. I wonder what he wants me to get up to. She looked at the man sitting beside her, his nose buried in his glass. Whatever it was, she decided, it would be better than this, and the peculiar customers were prepared to pay extra to indulge their perversions.

She picked up her bag and stood up. Her companion, lowered his glass and looked up at her belligerently.

“Where you going?”

“I'm sick of waiting for you to fill your great fat belly,” she said. “I'm going.”

A look of incredulity flickered across the man's face.

“What about . . .” he started to say. She didn't give him time to finish.

“What do you think I am anyway, a girl who can be bought for money. I've never been so insulted in my life.”

She moved round him and then turned for a parting gesture.

“It isn't safe for a respectable girl to be out on her own and no mistake. Good night to you.”

She threw back her head with what she hoped was a disdainful gesture and, leaving him with an astonished expression on his fat face, she walked out.

Georges gave her half a minute, then he stood up and followed her out. She was waiting twenty-five yards down the street. At first he didn't see her.

“Over here, dear,” she called. He turned towards her voice and moved to join her. She tucked her arm in his.

“My place or yours?” she said.

“Yours.”

“It's not far.”

She looked up at him as they walked along the narrow street. She'd seen him before, she thought. Not as a client, or she would have remembered, but she'd certainly seen him somewhere. She gave up worrying about it and started to hope that they would bump into Yvonne, who was becoming unbearable about her regular. After all, he

was only an assistant postmaster, and this man she was with must be a postmaster at least, probably higher. She squeezed the arm she was holding.

“I noticed you as soon as you came in,” she said.

He didn’t reply.

“We don’t get many of your sort down here, you see, that’s why I noticed you. Why did you pick me?” she asked, thinking it better to know the worst and be prepared for it.

He looked down at her and she noticed that his eyes seemed to glow slightly.

“You’re pretty,” he said.

“Am I really?” she said, delighted. Then she got down to business.

“My normal price is ten francs,” she said seriously. “But that’s if everything is ordinary like. If you want something different we’ll have to come to some arrangement. I’ll give you a reduction if you want to make it regular,” she added hopefully. That would be a real feather in her cap, a regular like this.

“Nothing different,” he said.

She felt vaguely disappointed. But she’d make it good for him, that way he might want to come again next week. They turned off into the street where she lived and stopped outside the front door. She searched for her key while he stood back, watching her. Then she opened the door and stood back so he could precede her in.

“Mind the dustbin in the hall,” she cautioned. Her room was on the first landing. She led the way up the stairs and opened the door of her room. For the first time she felt a little ashamed of her room, he was obviously used to far better things. She pushed a dirty petticoat under the bed with her foot as she undid her cape. She hung her cape up then turned towards him. He was standing just inside the door, watching her. He made no attempt to remove his coat or hat. He’s shy, she thought. Perhaps he wants to see me undress first. She pulled her clothes off quickly, not bothering to fold them as she took them off. When she was naked she padded across the room towards him. She reached up and put her arms round his neck, pressing herself to him.

“Come on, dear, take your clothes off,” she said.

But instead he reached into his pocket and pulled out a flat leather case.

“Oh dear,” she thought, “here comes the equipment.”

She stood back and watched curiously while he snapped open the lid of the case. Then her eyes widened. Nestling in the dark velvet were three gleaming surgical scalpels. She looked up from the scalpels to his face.

"I don't know what you want to do," she said, "but if you're going to use those, it's going to be expensive."

His next move was so quick she had no chance to cry out or move away. With his free hand he grabbed her throat and started to squeeze. She struggled for a moment, beating at his chest with her arms, then as the pressure on her throat increased, her head started to roar and a film of red mist started to block her vision. Her last conscious thought was that this was the end, and just before she passed out she remembered where she had seen him before.

Ten minutes later Georges came out of the front door and hurried up the street. As soon as he reached home he went into his laboratory and started to pack a surgical bag. In it he put the instruments he would need to perform the operation on Janine, along with the newly-acquired female uter-parathyroid. He closed the bag and carried it to the study. There he put it behind the door that led to the hall. Then he started to get ready for Pierre. He laid out the instruments that would be needed for the operation and checked that the uter-parathyroid was still in good condition. He felt a moment's anger that Ludwig should have considered the little man, whose gland this had been, of equal importance to himself. But Ludwig had paid for his error and the moment of anger passed quickly. He felt no remorse over what had happened to Ludwig. The old man had proved stupid and pigheaded over Georges' intentions towards Janine, and Janine was all that mattered to him now. He would tolerate nobody who tried to stand in his way now that he had decided what was to be done.

As soon as he judged everything was ready, he went out into the study again and poured himself a large brandy. He was still drinking it when Pierre was shown in. Pierre looked grim. He came in carrying a surgical bag and walked straight through to the laboratory without saying a word. Georges followed him and stood in the door watching Pierre sweep aside the instruments laid out for his use and start to unpack his own equipment.

"I take it you checked on what I told you," Georges said finally.

Pierre didn't turn round.

"I called at Janine's house and was told that Janine had cancelled a visit to the opera in order to go out with you."

"Then at least you know I am speaking the truth," said Georges.

"I wouldn't be here if I didn't," said Pierre. He turned to Georges.

"Let's get it over with," he said. Georges moved over and climbed up on to the table. Then as Pierre turned and started to open a bottle of ether, Georges spoke again.

“I am very grateful for what you are about to do,” he said.

“Save your gratitude,” said Pierre. “You know what I want from you.”

“I know,” said Georges.

“You agree if I do the operation you will release Janine immediately?”

Georges nodded.

“And leave Paris for ever?”

“I could hardly fail to do otherwise,” said Georges. “You know far too much about me for me to be able to stay here.”

Pierre came towards him with the ether and the mask.

“Lie down,” he said.

“Before he did so, Georges looked at Pierre steadily for a moment.

“Remember it will be extremely unfortunate if I don’t survive this operation.”

“Lie down,” said Pierre again.

Georges lay back and made himself as comfortable as possible. Then Pierre placed the mask over his face and started to drop the liquid on to the mask. Georges breathed deeply, and gradually the fumes crept into his mind, and he felt himself floating into unconsciousness.

As soon as Georges was unconscious Pierre got to work. He worked swiftly and skilfully, and in ten minutes he was tying off the last stitch that closed the incision. He noticed the area directly adjacent to where he had operated was hard with scar tissues, evidence of the previous operations.

As soon as he had finished, he lifted Georges easily and carried him into the study, laying him on the settee, then he returned to the laboratory and started to clean his instruments.

Georges regained consciousness two minutes later. He looked around him, vaguely at first, trying to orientate himself. Then he remembered. He looked down at his bare chest. There was the red scar of the new incision. His head flopped back on to the arm of the settee and he breathed a deep sigh of relief. A moment later he looked up as Pierre came through from the laboratory carrying a beaker containing a milky fluid. He moved over to Georges and held out the beaker.

“Drink this,” he said. Georges took the beaker and drained the draught in one swallow, then he handed the beaker back to Pierre.

“Thank you, Doctor,” he said, with a small smile touching the corners of his mouth.

“You’ll be able to walk in half an hour. You can take me straight to

Janine,” said Pierre.

He carried the beaker back into the laboratory and rinsed it out, then he completed the packing away of his instruments.

“Try moving around a little,” he called. Then after a moment he called again.

“How does it feel?”

There was no answer, and it took him two seconds to realize what this meant. He ran into the study. It was empty, the door to the hall was standing open. He ran into the hall and opened the front door. The mist was rising rapidly from the river as he ran down the path to the Rue Noire. He looked both ways, but of Georges there was no sign. After a moment he turned and ran back into the house. As he came in Roget emerged from the door under the stairs, pulling on his jacket.

“Did you see Dr. Bonner go out?” asked Pierre.

“No, sir, but I heard him. That’s why I came up.”

Pierre thought quickly.

“Do you know of any place, a private place, where Dr. Bonner would go if he wanted to be alone?” he asked.

“Here, sir?” said Roget.

“No. Other than this house?”

“No, sir,” said Roget. “I’m afraid I don’t.”

Pierre moved towards the study, then he turned back to Roget.

“Find Inspector Legris of the Sûreté. Bring him here. And hurry man, this is a matter of life or death.”

Roget looked at him curiously for a moment.

“Well, go on man, what are you waiting for.”

Roget turned and started back to the door under the stairs. As he disappeared Pierre heard him shouting.

“Get the carriage out, Henri, and be quick about it.”

As soon as Pierre had moved back into the laboratory, Georges swung his feet to the floor and stood up. A stab of pain warned him to be careful. He moved to the door and picked up the bag he had prepared. Then he went out into the hall. He took down his cloak, and as he let himself out of the front door he threw it over his shoulders. He heard Pierre’s voice from the laboratory.

“Try walking around a little.” Then he shut the door quietly behind him. He walked to the end of the Rue Noire, and there he hailed a hansom. The driver looked at him curiously as he climbed in, and Georges remembered that he was wearing no jacket or cravat under his cloak, and his shirt was unbuttoned to the waist. He pulled his

cloak tighter around him and gave the driver the address. In an hour it will be over, he thought. One hour from now and Janine and I will be able to go anywhere in the world. We'll always be together, for the rest of time. He'd teach Janine to do the operation, so in future there would be no need to rely on an outsider. They would have an incredible life together, their children could be introduced to the secret when they had reached an age it was desirable for them to remain. It would be a life of no sickness, no disease could visit their family, no pain could come to cause suffering. And the foundation of this dream would be laid in an hour. He sat back and started to work out the best way to explain to Janine what he was going to do.

Fifteen minutes after Georges had left her locked in the mysterious room Janine came downstairs again and started looking at the statues that littered the place. It was possible to trace Georges' evolution as a sculptor by studying the statues. The first works, good copies of life, but lacking the maturity of the later works, which possessed something that the artist had put into them, and were not mere copies. It was while she was examining a small, beautifully made head on one of the shelves that she heard someone giggle. It was a momentary sound, and at first it was not repeated. Then while she was still looking around her, the fear beginning to build up inside, she heard it again. It was unmistakably a giggle, and it seemed to contain an element of madness in the formless manner in which it was uttered. Janine decided that it came from behind a large packing case in the far corner of the room. She now had two alternatives. Either she could stay where she was and hope that the owner of the giggle would do likewise, or she could investigate. She decided that anything would be preferable to just waiting for something to happen. She picked up a stout piece of timber which had originally braced the lid of the packing case and moved towards where she estimated the sound had come from.

The packing case that screened the source of the sound was large, and she moved round to the far side of it before she attempted to peer behind it. When eventually she plucked up sufficient courage to take a look, she was conscious of a feeling of anti-climax. The packing case concealed a door let into the wall. There was a small grille set into the door and it was from behind this that the sound had obviously come. It was a stout door, she noticed, and there was a key hanging on the wall nearby. Whoever was in there, she had nothing to fear from them, she thought. It would have taken ten men to knock the door down. She approached the grille carefully, keeping close to the wall. Then when she was within reach, she risked a quick look through into the room beyond. At first she saw nothing, and she looked again, this

time pressing her face close up to the grille.

She was looking into a small cell-like room, about ten feet square. The floor was covered in straw, and in one corner sat Margo Philippe. At least Janine thought it was Margo Philippe. But then could the elegant woman she had seen only once, possibly have turned into this hideous scarred lunatic who was sitting on the floor of a filthy cell, gazing at a statue. The statue, Janine recognized immediately as the one that Georges had unveiled at his reception, there was no doubt about that. But the creature looking at it? Then Janine recognized the dress, the same dress Margo had been wearing at the reception, the night that she had disappeared. It was torn now, ripped across the shoulder, so that one breast stood free, and across that breast was a deep red burn scar, puckering the white flesh into disfigurement. But it was her face that made Janine catch her breath in horror. Here, too, was disfigurement, a great, raw patch of burned flesh and tissue, now clogged with dirt and livid with suppuration at the centre. It stretched across the whole of the lower half of her face, taking in the mouth which was a puffed mass of raw flesh. And it was from this mouth that the giggle came. As Janine watched, Margo giggled once more, then she reached out a trembling hand and touched the face of the statue, the face of the beauty she had once been. Janine took down the key and inserted it in the lock. The noise reacted on Margo immediately. Without looking at the door she moved quickly on all fours into the far corner of the cell, where she buried her disfigured face in her hands, her back towards the door. She seemed to try and curl herself into an insignificant bundle to escape notice. Janine moved up behind her and after a moment she put out a hand and touched Margo's bare shoulder. The flesh beneath her hand cringed away, and a sound like a whimper escaped from between Margo's fingers. Janine stroked the bare shoulder, trying to coax some confidence into the trembling body, and slowly it seemed that she succeeded. The trembling lessened under the gentle caress and after a few minutes Margo took her face from between her hands and looked round tentatively. Janine forced herself to repress a shudder of revulsion at the hideous scarring, and she managed a smile instead.

Margo looked at her blankly for a long time, while Janine continued to stroke the bare shoulder. Then it seemed that the vacant stare went out of her eyes, and slowly two large tears spilled over and trickled down the scarred face.

The discovery of Margo left Janine even more bewildered than she had been earlier. That Georges should leave her alone in this extraordinary place was bad enough, but that he should have Margo here as well was beyond comprehension. Perhaps Margo had had an accident, thought Janine, and Georges was treating her. But this idea

she dismissed almost as soon as it came to her. Firstly why would Georges have denied knowledge of Margo to the police, and secondly Georges would never keep a patient in a place like this. She stopped stroking Margo's shoulder and took the girl's hand in hers. There they both sat to await Georges' arrival.

Twenty minutes after sending Roget to find Legris, the inspector arrived at the house in the Rue Noir. Roget showed him into the study then recoiled with horror at what met his eyes. Pierre had been searching for some clues as to where Georges might have been keeping Janine prisoner. He had emptied all the desk drawers, strewing papers everywhere. He was using a paper knife on the centre drawer when Roget came in with Legris behind him.

"Here, you can't do that, those are the doctor's private papers," said Roget, outraged. Legris took in the scene at a glance. He turned to Roget.

"All right, I'll take care of it," he said.

Roget backed out of the study with one look at Pierre. When he had shut the door Legris turned to Pierre.

"I hope you have a reasonable explanation for . . ." he started, but Pierre didn't allow him to finish.

"He's got Janine Dubois prisoner somewhere. We must find out where. He's gone there now . . ."

"Hold on, sir, you'll have to start your explanation from the beginning."

"We haven't got time," said Pierre.

"Explain to me while I help you look," said Legris, moving over to a small bureau in the corner of the room. There he turned back to Pierre.

"What are we looking for?" he said.

"An address of some sort, somewhere where he could keep someone prisoner."

Legris opened the bureau and started sorting through its contents.

"I'll probably get the sack for this," he said. "But carry on."

Pierre quickly told him what he had found out about Georges.

"So he is the man from San Francisco and London," said Legris.

"And from a number of other places," said Pierre. "He's one hundred and four years old, Inspector, he's been having that operation for sixty years now. Every ten years he's moved and assumed a new identity."

"Leaving heaven knows what behind him," said Legris.

"He had to move on or people would have noticed that he didn't get any older. This time I've got a feeling he's not going to go alone."

"Miss Dubois?"

Pierre nodded, and at the same time Legris felt the pieces begin to click together. Five minutes before Roget had called for him at the Sûreté, he had been handed a report of a murder committed not more than an hour previously. A prostitute had been killed and mutilated with an incision in the upper abdomen. He had noted briefly that the mutilation coincided with that found on the man fished out of the lake last week. Then before he had been able to examine the matter further, Roget had arrived.

"If he wanted to perform this operation on Miss Dubois he'd need a gland like you were telling me about wouldn't he?" he asked.

"He would," said Pierre.

"A female one?"

"It would have to be," said Pierre. "Sex is the one difference in these glands. A male gland couldn't be implanted into a female . . . why?"

"Because an hour ago a girl was found murdered. I don't know whether the gland was missing, but someone had opened her up as though he was after something."

"Where was the incision?" said Pierre.

"I didn't see her, but the report put it about here." He indicated a spot just below his rib cage.

"That would be it," said Pierre. He resumed his search, frantically now. The centre drawer of the desk yielded a large leather-bound volume which he pushed to one side, and under the volume he found what they had been looking for.

It was a carter's receipt for a crate picked up at 13, Rue Noir, and delivered to the Railway Arches, Gare du Nord.

"We'll have to try it," said Legris. "It's the only clue we've got."

"Pray God it's the right one," said Pierre.

The carriage was waiting outside. Pierre and Legris clambered in and Legris gave the driver the address, and told him to hurry. They travelled for a while in silence, each with his own thoughts, then Legris turned to Pierre.

"This fluid you were telling me about," he said. "You say it affected his reason."

"From what he told me I gathered that for a few moments between it being necessary to take the fluid and his actually taking it, he became without reason at all. Completely mad."

"While at other times he's sane, rational, charming and intelligent."

Legris shook his head in wonderment.

“But at least we don’t have to worry about him losing his sanity again,” he said. “If he’s all right when he doesn’t need the fluid, then he must be all right now you’ve done the operation.”

Pierre turned and looked at Legris.

“I made the incision,” he said. “But I didn’t do the operation. I didn’t substitute the glands.”

When Georges arrived at his place beneath the railway arches, he let himself in and locked the door behind him. He opened the inner door, and after locking that too, he looked around for Janine. At first he thought she must have managed to escape somehow, then from his high place at the top of the stairs, he saw that the door to Margo’s cell was open.

Why hadn’t he killed the girl, he thought. What stupidity had made him bring her here. He would have to have killed her in the end anyway. He ran down the stairs and, leaving his surgical bag outside the door, he walked into the cell. Both women looked at him, the hideous and the lovely. Their reactions were in complete contrast. Margo uttered a whimper of fear and shuffled back against the wall, hiding her face in her hands. Janine stood up and faced him.

“I’ve been waiting for you to return, Georges,” she said evenly. “You have a number of things to explain.”

“I can, my darling, I can explain everything,” he said.

“I love you, Georges, and I trust you. So don’t lie to me.”

“Come out here,” he said, stepping aside.

Janine looked at Margo for a moment, then moved out of the cell. Georges stepped out behind her, pushing the door to after him. He followed Janine to the centre of the room to where there was a small table and a chair. Janine sat down and looked up at Georges.

Georges started to speak. He spoke slowly at first as he searched for the right words, then as he gained confidence, the words came faster, plotting the climaxes of his one hundred and four years. The faster he talked the more indrawn he became so that he failed to notice the change of Janine’s expression from inquiry, to disbelief, then to a dawning horror. And still Georges continued to talk, omitting only the deaths he had caused during his long life.

“. . . year after year after year, always knowing that at the end of each ten-year cycle it would be necessary to meet Ludwig somewhere so that he could perform the operation yet again. Always thinking that perhaps something would have happened to him and he wouldn’t be able to reach me. And then moving on, never able to stay in one place

for more than a few years in case people started to get suspicious. And then towards the end of each ten-year cycle, the fluid, which kills all reason but is the only thing to keep me alive until the operation is performed again. This has been my life, not life, existence, until I met you. Now you're going to come with me, Janine. I'm going to take you with me. But first you must become as I am. Think of it, never to grow old, never to be ill, always to remain exactly as we are for all time."

His first consciousness of Janine's reaction was as she whispered.

"No . . ." she said softly.

He looked at her and imagined he saw in her face the fear of the operation.

"It's nothing, my darling, you won't feel anything. Then when you wake up you'll know that you'll always stay as beautiful as you are now, always."

He moved over and started to undo the black surgical bag. Then a crash made him turn back to Janine. She had jumped to her feet, kicking back the chair she had been sitting in. And Georges realized that the fear and horror on her face was for him.

He stepped towards her, his hands reaching out in front of him.

"Janine, my love, please. Don't look like that."

"Don't come near me," she said softly. "Don't touch me."

"Janine, please. I love you, I love you desperately."

"You're an old man, an old old man. I loved you and I trusted you. No, don't come near me."

He had moved forward again, and she backed away.

He was about to take another step forward, when he stopped suddenly.

A flicker of pain crossed his face, leaving a puzzled expression behind it. Then as he made to move forward again, he doubled over, his face twisting in agony. He stumbled sideways upsetting a crate which fell to the ground with a crash. Then he started to straighten up again, staring at the backs of his hands. Erupting visibly on his hands were numerous small sores, which spread rapidly, joining each other in a large suppurating patch of rotting flesh. The diseases of a lifetime were eager to claim their toll. When he finally looked up from his hands, Janine screamed aloud in horror. She saw an old old man, teeth blackened and rotting, hair falling out in great lumps, and skin wrinkled beyond belief. Sores were rapidly breaking out on the visible portions of his body in great ugly blotches.

As he straightened up he appeared to be at least eighteen inches shorter than he had been, due to the bent and twisted position of his body, grotesque in its attitude.

Then from the mouth came a distortion of sound as Georges tried to talk. After a second attempt he mastered his physical incapacities and managed to croak a sentence.

"He didn't do it. He didn't do the operation. I'm going to die, Janine, I'm going to die."

He took a lurching step towards her, nearly overbalancing. Then he regained his equilibrium, and advanced another step.

Janine backed away from the horror that was coming at her, until resistance at her back showed her that she was against the wall. Further retreat was impossible. Then Georges reached out one hideously gnarled hand and touched her lightly on the arm. She screamed with pain and a livid burn mark appeared where he had touched her. Then as he reached out again, there came two sounds simultaneously. First there was a hammering from the outside door, and second there was a wild scream of laughter from Margo. The sounds stopped Georges' outstretched hand, and he moved his head vaguely from one to the other. In this moment of respite Janine slid round his reach and started to run up the stairs. At the same time, Margo, who had been watching from the door of her cell, laughed again, a wild, incoherent sound. Then she stepped into the room. Georges stood undecided for a moment, then he looked up to where Janine was banging on the door at the top of the stairs, crying for help. Outside, the attack on the outer door increased in violence. Then Georges started up the stairs, intent only on reaching Janine. His movements were slow and painful, and he used both hands on the bannister, dragging himself upwards. Janine saw him coming and continued to bang on the door, shouting for help. Then Margo seemed to gather in her muddled mind what was happening. She picked up the oil lamp and started up the stairs after Georges. She reached Georges when he was a step away from Janine. With a chuckle of inner amusement she held the hot funnel of the lamp against the side of Georges' face. Georges screamed with pain, and there was a sound of burning flesh. Then he turned from Janine and reached out with both hands for Margo. At the same time came the sound of the outer door being broken down and the clatter of footsteps approaching the inner door. But now Janine had stopped crying out, and she was watching with terrible fascination what was happening on the stairs.

Margo had backed away from Georges until she reached the bottom step. Georges had followed her down, lurching from side to side, his hands reaching out to take hold of her. Now Margo had stopped as though to allow Georges to reach her. His hands clasped her shoulders, and there was the sound of burning flesh again, while a thin curl of smoke writhed up from between his fingers. But Margo seemed to feel no pain. Still with a smile on her face, she brought the

lamp down hard across Georges' head, smashing it and soaking him with oil.

Then the inner door crashed open, and Pierre took Janine into the protection of his arms, while Legris followed him and stood for a moment at the top of the stairs trying to orientate himself to his surroundings.

Suddenly everyone in the room realized what Margo was going to do. She was holding the lighted wick of the lamp in her hand, and now she smiled at Georges broadly. Georges, soaked with the oil from the lamp released her and started to back away from her fearfully. With the smile on her face she moved after him, and before the three at the top of the stairs could make a move, she touched the naked flame to the edge of Georges' coat. Immediately he became a roaring inferno of flame, a living torch, as the oil from the lamp exploded into fire.

He lurched sideways with a scream of agony and rolled into a heap of straw packing. The flames gobbled at the straw greedily, and quickly reached out to the next heap of packing.

Legris started down the stairs, but realized immediately that he would be unable to reach either Georges or Margo, separated from them as he was by an ever widening path of flame. He retreated back up the stairs, and stood with the other two looking down into the room.

Georges was still lurching and staggering around the room, while Margo, oblivious to the flames around her, had started to laugh. Above the vicious crackling of the flames her laughter came clearly to the onlookers.

Then Georges died. He reached up to support himself on a shelf, which collapsed under his weight. He fell to the ground, his clothes and now even his body, blazing fiercely. This time he didn't get up, and as the flames licked greedily at the hem of Margo's dress, she continued to laugh and laugh.

Two days later Pierre and Janine arrived at Legris' office at the Sûreté. When they were seated, and Legris had asked after Janine's health, he sat back and opened a large file in front of him.

"We have a clear picture now of all that Georges Bonner was during his long life. He and Ludwig Weisz made a great discovery, but like a number of scientific discoveries, it was mishandled. Indeed it is difficult to see how this particular discovery could be handled at all. Accordingly the authorities have destroyed all the records of the experiment. As to the man himself, the records will be closed and no statements will be issued. We have informed the police departments of

the various countries of the facts, and I doubt that they will want to carry the matter further. We can learn one thing from this story, and that is the folly of attempting to cheat. Whether it be at cards, at love, at work, or in this case, life itself. Cheats may prosper for a time, but eventually they will be found out, this is inevitable. Bonner did some good work in his time, he was a doctor and he saved many lives. But he was the biggest cheat of all, he attempted to cheat death. Death is the great equalizer, she comes to all men rich and poor, famous and infamous. Bonner succeeded in cheating her for a long time, but she claimed her prize at the finish."

He closed the folder in front of him, and looked across at Janine and Pierre.

"The less said about the Bonner case, the better," he said. "And as far as officialdom is concerned it's closed."

"His statues," said Pierre. "What's become of them?"

"They've been broken up. Most of them were destroyed in the fire, the others we took care of."

Pierre looked at Janine.

"Tell him," he said to her.

"Tell me what Mademoiselle?" said Legris.

"I have two of his statues I should like to keep," she said.

"If you wish," said Legris. He stood up. "Now I shall wish you good-bye."

They shook hands and walked out of the police building into the sunshine of the spring afternoon.

Janine took Pierre's arm.

"You don't mind me keeping those statues do you dear?" she said.

"Not if you want to," he said smiling, at her.

She thought of the two statues that were now at her home. The small deer figure which she had retrieved from the smouldering wreckage of the room beneath the station, and the full figure of herself which she had had delivered to her house from Georges' studio. The first and the last work of the man who had cheated death.

THE END